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STEAM MACHINES
HOW VALVE WILL ROCK THE CONSOLE MARKET

COMEBACK KID



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HIGHLIGHTS

ASSASSIN'S CREED IV REVIEWED ■ THE CREW ■ THE WOLF AMONG US
TITANFALL ■ GTA ONLINE: SUCCESS OR FAILURE? ■ THIEF
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Getting a new console is a very different experience for kids and adults; as a child, it can be the gateway to years of formative interactive experiences that end up defining your tastes forever. As an adult, it's more a case of asking yourself whether you can a) afford to spend £400 on a console and b) whether the software even makes that purchase worthwhile.

I'll be completely honest – while I think both consoles have the strongest launch line-ups of any generation, the games that buzz me on owning new hardware won't be there on day one. Instead I see curios and pretty versions of experiences I've had many times on hardware I already own (but I would like to be proved wrong). However, I look to 2014 and I see *InFamous: Second Son* and *The Witcher 3*, two games that have already shown me the conceptual next gen-ness that sells me on an expensive piece of kit.

And then the real fun begins, that odd commercial experience of subscribing to a particular gaming sub-culture and seeing how Microsoft or Sony manages to keep things interesting for four or five years. Developers will rise and fall, franchises will evolve or die and the landscape will change forever. A new console is about as exciting as it gets. This month, Microsoft and Sony tell us why they think they deserve your hard-earned money.

Samuel Roberts
EDITOR





Kept you waiting, huh?



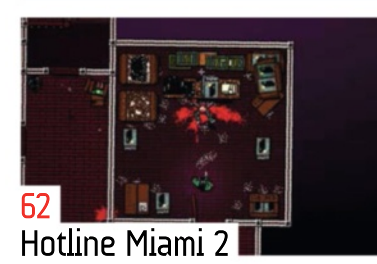
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Contents

www.gamestm.co.uk 141 | 13

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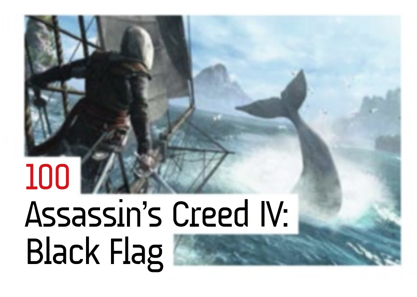
PREVIEWS



62 Hotline Miami 2

REVIEWS

DISCUSS



100 Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag

FEATURES



74 Feature

The Wolf Among Us

How Telltale Games followed The Walking Dead with another compelling comic book adaptation

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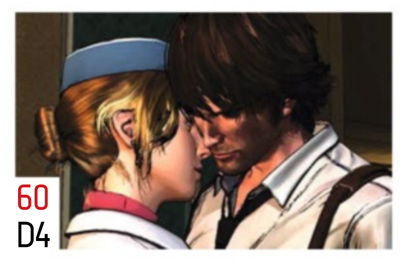
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Turn to page 92

Discuss

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(VALVE'S CONSOLE)

Inside The Steam Machine

→ Valve's Linux-based quest to save the PC from Microsoft is no longer vapourware

Valve's long-awaited games consoles, Steam Machines, may or may not turn out to be a game changer, but it's certainly an attempt to break some long established rules. On the one hand, it might not seem like it. Technologically speaking, it's a PC that you plug into your TV. More than ever before though, the same can be said for the competition - both Xbox One and PlayStation 4 are more similar than they're different, down to using many of the same components. The biggest differences this generation are in the software, and that's a battlefield Valve is used to playing on. As for the hardware, it has found a way around its inexperience.

The plan is this. Instead of a single one-size-fits-all Steam Machine, Valve is working with a number of hardware partners to create several kinds, much as no one company has a monopoly on the PC. It has a prototype of its own, which will be going out to 300 lucky Steam users this year, but chances are you won't be buying one of the final systems from it directly. It's simply not set up for that kind of manufacturing.

Instead, Valve's focus is on what it calls SteamOS, a custom version of the free operating system Linux, and a dedicated SteamOS controller (though others, including mouse and keyboard, will be supported) that will provide the same experience whoever made your box. In this way, if you only play casual games, adventures, and so on, you don't need to buy a machine capable of running *Crysis 4* in all its glory. Conversely, if you want to get the absolute best performance each year has to offer, you'll be able to stay on the bleeding edge without waiting another five to ten years for Sony/Microsoft to launch the next-next-generation. You'll also be able to install and use SteamOS on your existing PC or dedicated home-brewed rig, completely free, allowing for easily upgradable systems, carefully engineered boxes under the TV, and any other kind imaginable.

Linux has never been a great gaming system, not least because of licensing issues over drivers and the fact that games are written for Microsoft's DirectX - they're not insoluble problems, but ones that have been in need of a champion with a lot of money to try to solve rather than simply hack around. Valve has long wanted to be that champion, not least because right now the PC gaming market is heavily dependent on Microsoft's good graces. Most games use its DirectX technologies. As a platform, Windows 8 – described by Valve founder Gabe Newell as "a giant sadness" – also bodes ill, with its attempted move to an Apple App Store model demonstrating how easy it would

Below With Steam's library available from the start, it has a significant advantage in back catalogue over Xbox One and PS4.



DATA STREAM → KINGDOM HEARTS 2.5 REMIX ANNOUNCED FOR PS3 IN 2014, CONTAINS TWO GAMES

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be for Microsoft to largely close down the traditionally open market. With SteamOS, Valve will still own the Steam platform, but it has promised source code for its software for others to build on, and the improvements made to get it run should – repeat: should – benefit everyone.

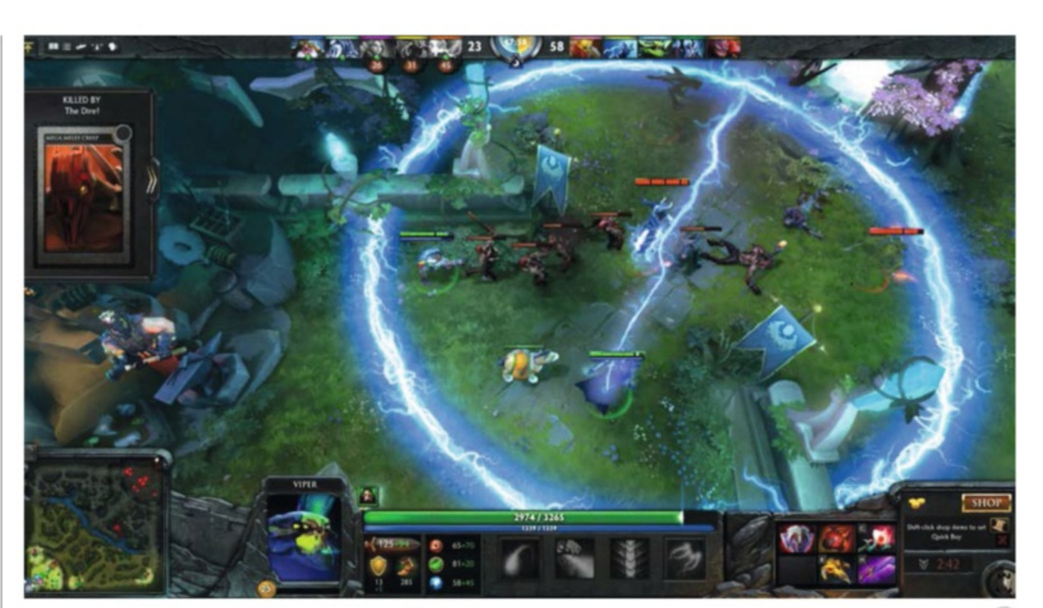
Those begin with Valve working with 3D graphics juggernaut NVIDIA to improve performance on Linux, and just as importantly, to find ways for companies already on Steam to port their games across as easily as possible – ports that will in theory be as easy to release standalone as on Steam. The traditionally techie face of Linux will also be pushed to the back in favour of a much more user-friendly interface. It has yet to be revealed, but a flavour of it can be seen in the living room-focused Big Picture Mode in the current Steam client. Essentially, users won't have to care that it's Linux under the hood. Switch on, and you're ready to go.

VALVE'S HOPE IS that by the time SteamOS launches, a sizeable chunk of its catalogue will have been ported and be ready to go – anything you've bought already being automatically unlocked. For everything else, there's a back-up option: In-Home Streaming. This turns the Steam Machine into a mostly dumb client, streaming games directly from your existing PC to your television over your home network. There will inevitably be more lag when doing this than playing directly on the Steam Machine, so competitive shooters and other highly sensitive genres are likely out. It should be fine for more cerebral or casual titles though, especially over powerline networking, though the likes of strategy games are unlikely to be much fun if their interfaces were designed with the assumption that players would be sitting a few inches away from the screen rather than slumping a few feet away. Likewise, while the lag will be no problem, squinting at chat/data in MMOs is unlikely to be much fun. Any genre with a foothold on consoles though should be fine, along with staples like adventure games, which will think they're being played on a mouse even when it's actually the Steam Machines controller.

PC users worried about getting the runaround here shouldn't be too concerned. Games are already written on PC regardless of their destination platform, meaning that the only real chance of developers going SteamOS only is if Microsoft locks things down – the exact time when an option is needed. The main technology shift is from Microsoft's DirectX graphical systems to an alternative called OpenGL, long championed by the likes of id Software's John Carmack, which is open to all (and, conveniently, used by the PS4). The biggest risk of Valve's plans bleeding into general games is that the Steam Machines controller may become the PC platform's de facto gamepad, though even then, it would only be replacing the outgoing Xbox 360 one.

Beyond this, just about everything available on Steam should be included, like Steam Workshop for integrated modding, cloud saving of games and preferences, and upcoming family options for the client that will give everyone their own saves and achievements and even lists of games in the ➔

> "The biggest risk of Valve's plans bleeding into games is that the Steam Machine's controller may become the PC platform's de facto gamepad"



Above: Valve has always been faster on the draw than its rivals, from sales to embracing free to play.



Right: How powerful will the Steam Machine be? You choose. If you want a £950 GeForce Titan, go for it.

THE LINUX DIFFERENCE

➔ If it's so good, why hasn't it ever taken off for games?

LINUX IS AN 'open source' operating system, which means that anyone can both download and build on its original code, and release their own variants - Ubuntu for instance is Linux and applications, packaged together into a dedicated distribution. While SteamOS is free, it's possible to sell open source apps, as long as anyone can have the source, and charge for services.

Things get muddled though when people write 'closed source' software for it, which classically includes NVIDIA's graphics drivers (Linux creator Linus Torvalds having openly declaring it the worst company he's worked with, followed by giving it the finger and a cry of "NVIDIA, **** YOU!") This means that nobody can poke around and add/fix bits, and with Linux never having been a developmental priority, their quality out of the box has traditionally been poor. As of September though, the company has declared its intention to improve matters and open up more data, and it's hoped that Valve's pressure will add even more impetus to bring the quality of Linux drivers up to their far more advanced Windows/Mac versions.






interface. Yet-to-be-confirmed additions include streaming, which is likely, and the ability to add non-Steam games. The chances of Valve charging money to play online, or for premium services, is also somewhere between zero and nil. Individual companies of course will be able to, with the money handled by the existing Steam Wallet.

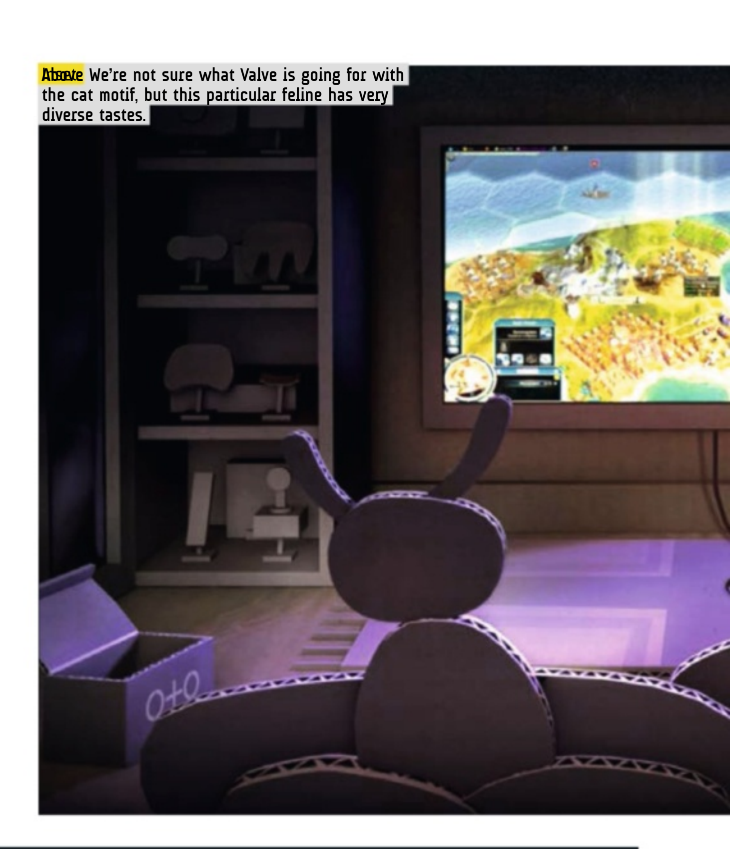
As with the Xbox One and PS4 though, SteamOS isn't just about gaming. Valve hasn't confirmed any partnerships yet, but Steam Machines will be able to hook into assorted media services – Netflix and Spotify seeming obvious contenders – and will hopefully support streaming over DLNA for local content. Valve has also made a specific point of saying that applications as well as games will be available, though not whether we're just talking for tasks like web browsing, or going all the way to the likes of You Need A Budget 4.

That's the Steam Machines/SteamOS pitch. But will it work?

PUT SIMPLY, IF any company but Valve was even suggesting it, the answer would be a flat 'no'. Even if you see the machine itself as just a glorified PC, the ambition, the amount of work it demands of the PC game development industry on both game and technology sides, and the reliance it has on the hardware industry not just churning out cheap crap are all individually huge hurdles for any company to try to leap. It's not enough to simply release something cool if the cool thing doesn't have the trifecta of luck, timing, and serious commercial weight behind it, as many previous attempts to push Linux on the desktop have proven.

Valve, however, has some form here, creating not just the first truly successful digital distribution platform, but one so beloved that its users routinely re-purchase games just to have them in their Steam accounts. It's also arriving at the right time, with Windows as a platform going through a weak patch and more and more gamers not actually caring what they use.

By providing a way of cutting it out of the equation, smaller developers especially can be more confident that there will be a PC platform in a few years, with Linux offering both a solid platform now and an escape route in case of Valve changing tack later on. This is of course assuming that Valve's claims of SteamOS's gaming capabilities actually live up to the hype, though with both


Above We're not sure what Valve is going for with the cat motif, but this particular feline has very diverse tastes.

MEET THE STEAM CONTROLLER

Valve's replacement for the gamepad, mouse and keyboard



PROFILES
Games designed with Steam Controller in mind will know how to use it. Every game on Steam will support it somehow though, with Steam acting as a middle-man if it's expecting another joypad or a mouse/keyboard (though typing won't be fun). Profiles will be sharable online to get up and running immediately.

DUAL TRACKPADS
Yes, trackpads. They're intended to be used with thumbs, giving precision closer to a mouse, with haptic feedback that can deliver more than just a quick rumble - developers getting precise control over frequency, amplitude and direction. The haptic rumblers can also be used as mini-speakers.

BUTTONS
There are 16 buttons, half designed to be accessible without lifting thumbs from the trackpad. The controller is symmetrical, to be just as effective for left-handed as right-handed use.

TOUCHSCREEN
High resolution, and acting as a click button for extra precision. When touched, a display is overlaid over the game that you're playing so that you can see exactly what you're selecting. Can be used for anything from panning around a map to picking options from a menu.

WHAT'S MISSING?
So far, there's no sign of a microphone/headphone jack, though there's an obvious button for push-to-talk. The expectation is likely that you'll bring your own equipment to the party, ideally via Bluetooth.

AND IF YOU HATE IT?
Like everything else, Valve intends the controller to be open and hackable. It'll also be possible to attach a mouse and keyboard if you prefer, or an alternate controller that the system can detect.


RAYMAN LEGENDS AND SPLINTER CELL: BLACKLIST SALES DISAPPOINT FOR UBISOFT, MISS TARGETS



NVIDIA and OpenGL backing up its Linux play, there's no reason they can't at least match Windows.

For users, the advantages are many – especially the ones who are about to lose their digital game collections and data with the move to a new console. Steam Machines draw no line between generations. Valve is also by far the most aggressive platform owner when it comes to sales, user-generated content, and embracing new models like free to play. Buying a top-end Steam Machine will inevitably be more expensive up front than an equivalent next-gen console, but filling it with content will be very cheap in the long run.

The fact that Valve doesn't have to care how you use its platform also helps, especially if its streaming proves effective enough that an otherwise junkable old PC currently gathering dust can instantly become a dumb gaming behemoth. Whether the Steam Machines/SteamOS gamble works out for Valve though, it's a gamble that it needs to make, and one that only it could do – it's a fascinating experiment at worst, and a long hope for the cutting of the Microsoft cord at best.

The joy of the PC is that it is an open market, and as much as Valve will own a massive, hugely powerful store if its plans work, it can never own the Linux platform's foundations. Nobody can. And now more than ever before, that's something the PC needs, whatever flag it flies when switched on.

Above It's easy to forget, but Steam was deeply unpopular at launch, and only took off because Valve forced everyone to use it if they wanted to play *Half-Life 2*.

"The advantages are many – especially for those about to lose their digital game collections and data with the move to a new console. Steam Machines draw no line between generations"



Above This is as close as we've got to a picture of a Steam Machine in operation… though the use of *Civ 5* as the demo game shows that Valve's not forgotten its PC roots.



NINTENDO IS PONDERING THE IDEA OF A ZELDA MOVIE WITH INTERACTIVE ELEMENTS…

Discuss

(INTERVIEW)

Return to Rapture

→ **games™** speaks to Andres Gonzalez – lead designer on BioShock Infinite's first piece of narrative DLC, Burial At Sea – about diving back into the world of the original BioShock and the challenges of moving from Columbia to the murky depths of Rapture…

As a studio, how long ago did you determine the DLC would be set in Rapture?
This was built by the same team that worked on *Infinite*, so any conversations about the DLC basically happened after *Infinite* was out the door.

How did your disciplines adapt to DLC – how did you find the timeframe of working on a DLC project versus working on a full title?
Coming off *Infinite* was a very big project – we were tired and a lot of people needed to take some time off and things like that, but when the idea came up to do the DLC in Rapture, we knew we needed to build the city before the fall in the new engine that we made for *Infinite*. We were very excited about exploring how Booker and Elizabeth would react in a setting like Rapture. So we applied some of the lessons from *Infinite* – this was an engine that, by this time, we knew very well. We knew the answers to a lot of the creative questions that came up when trying to do a companion character, so this was just about tackling a new set of questions – how do we represent Rapture before the fall? How do we integrate the lore of *BioShock Infinite* and the lore of the original *BioShock* to create a new and unique experience?

Above With no expense spared, Irrational pays homage to the noir films it has been inspired by.



Right The art deco influence remains in Rapture's rebuild, resplendent in its pre-fall glory. We anticipate seeing everything slowly crumble around us, charting the city's descent.

For the studio, how much of the decision to set *Burial At Sea* in Rapture was motivated by nostalgia?
I wouldn't say it was nostalgia. When we were discussing several possibilities that we could do for the DLC and Rapture came up, it wasn't something that we had really thought about – when it was thrown on the table we all sort-of looked at each other and we couldn't find a reason *not* to do it. Once we realised that it was possible, there was an element of figuring out how we could integrate both worlds; we hoped it was something that would really excite the fans, but largely the team that shaped Infinite was a team that didn't work on the original game. Nostalgia, per se, wasn't a huge part of it.

You didn't work on the original *BioShock*, so what was it like for you to reconstruct Rapture in this fashion? What was your relationship with the original *BioShock* before you joined the team?
Before I joined the team, I was just a fan, just like anybody else. I played the original several times through, and it was one of my favourite games. Having the opportunity to work on it and to recreate it pretty much from scratch, which we did in the new engine, and to represent what Rapture was like before the events of the fall – that was something that was I never expected to work on and it was very satisfying creatively.

When you were recreating familiar environments [in the DLC], did you have to fit the construction of them into the



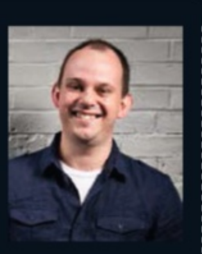
NINTENDO ANNOUNCES TERRIFYING PIKACHU GAME WHERE THE YELLOW MOUSE COPIES YOUR FACE



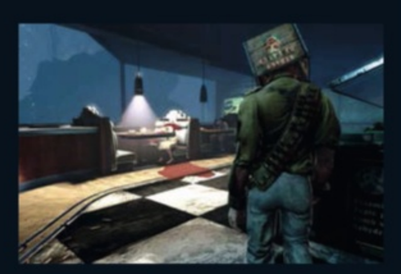
> "Elizabeth doesn't have the same naïve look on the world that she had at the start of Infinite; she's not that girl trapped in a tower anymore"
>
> Andres Gonzalez, lead designer

dynamic of *Infinite*? How did that process work?
That was actually one of the biggest challenges we faced; there is no environment in *Burial At Sea: Episode One* that is 1:1 with what was in the original game, but there are a lot of things that will feel very familiar. Having a companion character changes things dramatically; we had to look at what we were building, and look at environments that helped us tell the story we were trying to tell. We had to think about how Elizabeth and Booker reacted to the enemies, and how the enemies reacted to them – now you hear enemies off in the distance and you have more of a chance to plan your attack before you execute, so there's more player initiated combat like there was in the original game. When we built the environments, we had to take a step back – we knew that we were going to change the way that we built the encounters, so we had to build the levels to support not only the new gameplay mechanics, but also integrate all the lessons learned about how to integrate a companion character and the new methods of storytelling that we did for *Infinite*.

How different is the player's dynamic and relationship with Elizabeth in *Burial At Sea* compared to *Infinite* itself?
I think that both Booker and Elizabeth have a different feel to them this time around. It is the Elizabeth of *Infinite*, but it's the Elizabeth *after* the events. She's more mature this time around – she's gone through a lot and that comes across in her character. She doesn't have the same naïve look on the world that she had at the start of *Infinite*; she's not that girl trapped in a tower anymore. We use the same type of storytelling that we did in *BioShock Infinite*, but this time there's a lot of non-linearity in the way we set things up. We reworked and rebalanced the gameplay experience to lean more towards resource management and stealth, so it has elements of the original *BioShock*, but built on the *Infinite* engine. What we tried to do was draw from both games and put together something that felt new and unique.



Above Andres Gonzalez, who worked on *Red Faction: Guerrilla*, too.



Left It looks like none of the atmosphere of the original will be lost in *Burial At Sea*.

WE BUILT THIS CITY

How Burial At Sea permits a Rapture-full experience

WITH THE ADVANCEMENTS in technology that have been introduced since the original *BioShock* released back in 2007, the team at Irrational knew they'd have to rebuild Rapture with all the polish of *Infinite*'s Columbia – we were concerned that this complete re-haul would take away some of the atmosphere the original Rapture had. "One of the best things you can do here is take your time and walk around and really look at the city," Gonzalez assured us. "When we built the city and started to populate it with AI, we tried to recreate what it would have felt like before the fall – we started to think about what the citizens of Rapture would have done, what their day-to-day lives would have been like. There's a lot there for people who want to dig and who really understand the world."

FURTHER READING



New Xbox Mag For A Brand New Xbox

X-ONE has landed. A revamped magazine from the makers of X360, to coincide with the launch of Microsoft's Xbox One console, this publication covers everything you could possibly need that's Xbox One-related (although we do our best to scratch that itch in games™, too, of course). Featuring a launch guide to the console in its newest issue, with every upcoming title covered in the enormous preview section, this is a contemporary magazine for any Xbox gamer interested in the new console. Of course, that doesn't mean Xbox 360 gamers are left out, either – as Microsoft's eight-year console is brought to a dignified end with *Fable Anniversary*, *Dark Souls* and every *FIFA* up until 2024 guaranteed to be released on 360, every cornerstone of the Xbox market is covered by X-ONE. It maintains the irreverent but authoritative tone of X360, and with new community elements, it's easier than ever to interact with the writers and let them know what you think of the latest Xbox games. In subsequent issues, X-ONE will go deep into the future of the Xbox One console, and why Microsoft's strategy on next gen will yield some fascinating results for those invested in its online-centric console. Visit XB1.co.uk and GreatDigitalMags.com to get it.

TITANFALL GETS A US RELEASE DATE OF 13 MARCH, AND SHORTLY AFTER IN EUROPE AND OTHER AREAS

(OPINION)

When A Game Isn't A Game: Who Cares?

David Cage, Journey and a number of indie titles have sparked a dialogue about what truly makes a game – but such debates may only impose limits on what we can hope for from the medium

The justified indie game success *Gone Home* generated some chatter upon release and subsequent near universal acclaim: what makes a game a game? How strong do the mechanics need to be for it to count as a valid interactive experience on a criteria founded on games that were just about mechanics? And why should it matter so much?

Well, it shouldn't. *Gone Home* was built entirely on narrative, letting players wander through a house and piece together the story of the people who live there through snippets of audio, scraps of paper and telling environmental details. David Cage's *Beyond: Two Souls* and *Heavy Rain*, while more traditionally game-y than *Gone Home*, provoke even stronger debate about the purpose of a videogame.

In that case, a lot of it has to do with the persona of David Cage and his ambitions for interactive storytelling possibilities – there's a certain amount of pretension in the way he sells what he's trying to do. And perhaps that's the problem; the perception of a narrative-centric dramatic game is that there's a desire to be radical and deliberately against the curve. That will always generate a prickly reaction from a certain audience.

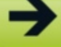
Yet really, there's not a lot in it between *Gone Home* and the very best point-and-click adventures in terms of gameplay-to-story ratio. The amount of gameplay delivered is basically the same and there are even some similarities with the framework. The fact that the gameplay is slight is irrelevant – if the goal of the product is to deliver a story, then surely the only mechanics that should matter are the ones that support that goal and the quality of the storytelling itself, both in the delivery and the scriptwriting.

We predict that these types of criticisms will recur a lot in the next few years, as other developers follow in *Gone Home*'s wake with equally narrative-centric indie titles. *Dear Esther* and *Thirty Flights Of Loving* also straddle the line of what 'counts' as a game, and the debate of these titles' worth invariably comes down to how much the user considers them to be games in the elementary sense.

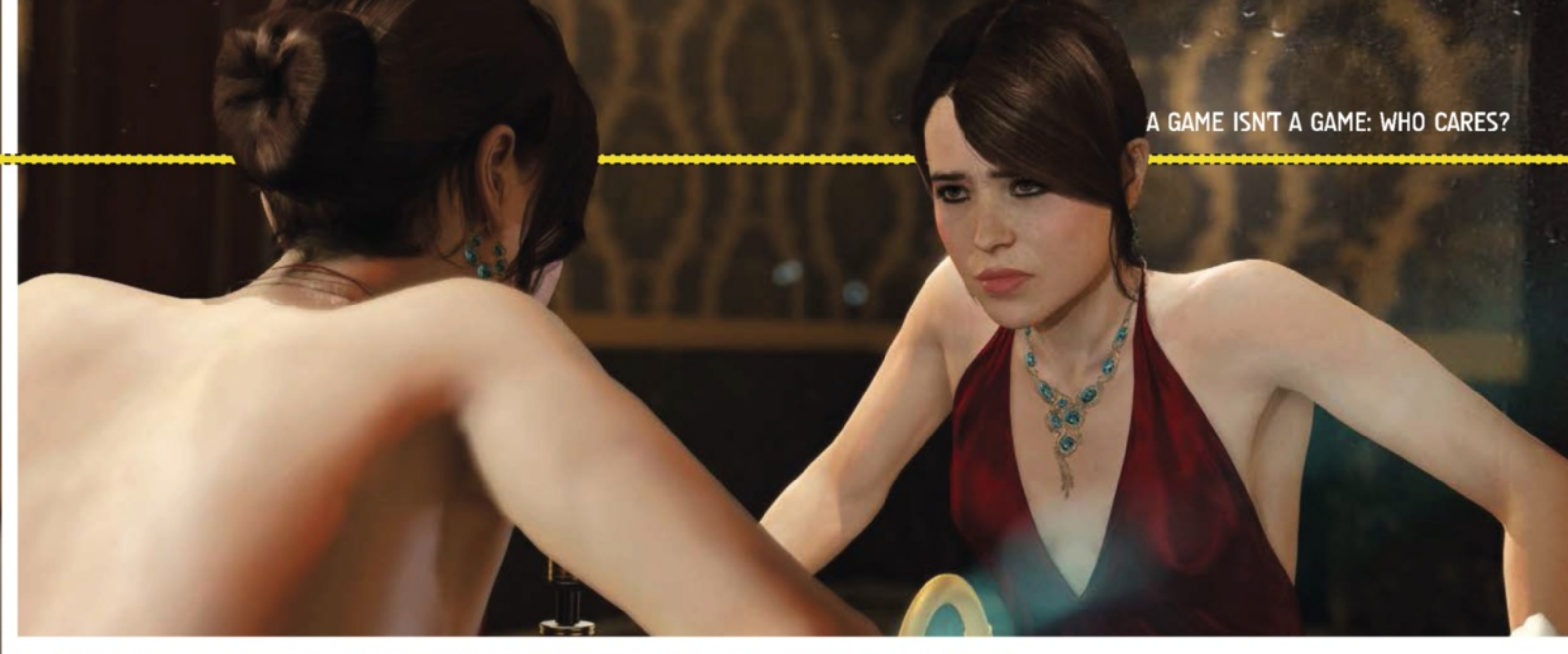
It should be much simpler than that. We should accept that the spectrum of videogames can expand without being at the expense of existing genres and ideas. *Space Invaders* and *Gone Home* can co-exist, and



Below *Beyond* has Jodie playing a guitar. No gameplay purpose, but a nice moment.



WATCH DOGS DELAYED UNTIL SPRING 2014 TO GIVE THE DEVELOPERS EXTRA TIME, SAYS UBISOFT





“ Interactive narrative isn't shorthand for a critically acclaimed game – it's all about application and execution ”

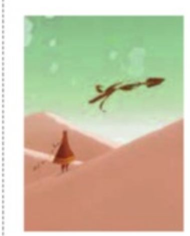
that potential for diversity in interactivity is a reason to take pride in our medium. Interactive narrative isn't shorthand for a critically acclaimed game, in the same way a mechanically complex game wouldn't be automatically acclaimed for being as such. It's all about application and execution – the same basic parameters govern both, it's just that one is quite obviously in shorter supply than the other, and therefore when a videogame does interactive narrative well, we should pay attention.

“I think *Super Hexagon* and *Dear Esther* are really close,” The Chinese Room's Andrew Crawshaw told us a few months back. “They're both about how much you can take away while still being a game by the end of it.”

Just as the growth of truly refined interactive narrative is slow in the games industry, so too is the acceptance of such titles by some players. We awarded *Gone Home* 9/10, and we're proud we did so – we cannot see how the addition of puzzles, guns or any other traditional design trapping would improve the game from what it is. When we reflect on that team's previous project, the exceptional DLC add-on *BioShock 2: Minerva's Den*, it's the course of the story we remember, as opposed to the times we tore through splicers with a drill. Clearly, Fullbright elected to make a game that built on the former rather than the latter, and that's one part of why it's so interesting: by focusing just on story, *Gone Home* would live or die on the *quality* of that story. Fortunately, the execution was compelling enough to justify the creative decision.

That's the real challenge for these games that are narrative-centric, that are taken to task for not being 'game-y' enough – the story has to be good. The divided response to *Beyond: Two Souls* demonstrates this; it's a story that worked for some, including us, but others felt the tale got out of David Cage's hands in much the same way *Fahrenheit* did. Yet ultimately the medium is stronger for having such an experimental title, and whatever criteria each of us may have for what makes a 'proper' videogame, the expansion of what falls under that category should only be considered a positive phenomenon.

Above Ellen Page's performance is crucial to the success of *Beyond*.



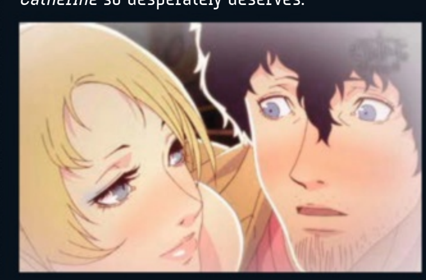
Above *Journey* isn't especially mechanical; it's all about experience.

Left *Gone Home* has provoked discussion on how game-y a game needs to be, a criteria that is arguably out of date.

When gameplay gets in the way

When good storytelling is derailed by arbitrary mechanics

Catherine is one of those games where the score doesn't tell anywhere near the full story of whether you should play it or not. Indeed, it is a fairly average puzzler that becomes painfully difficult on anything higher than the easy settings – yet sitting alongside that is a fascinating morality-based choice narrative where protagonist Vincent, in a long-term relationship he's unsure of, accidentally has a fling with a flirtatious girl that quickly escalates into a chaotic affair. You then steer the course of Vincent's morality, good or bad, with consequences that follow. The gameplay and narrative were so at odds with each other – yet we'd still recommend it. It demonstrates what happens when a developer lets a compelling narrative hook be spoiled by the necessity to include antiquated mechanics, thereby closing the story off from a wider audience that a title like *Catherine* so desperately deserves.





DRIVECLUB DELAYED UNTIL 2014, LEAVING THE PLAYSTATION 4 LAUNCH LINE-UP AS KILLZONE AND KNACK



#TRENDING

with NowGamer.com's Ryan King



Discuss Beyond, Not Its Creator



***Beyond: Two Souls* is an interesting game. Flawed but interesting. There's something beguiling about the mundane tasks asked of you. Whether smashing through guitar chords to alleviate anger or nervously tidying up for a dinner date in the evening, *Beyond* is stuffed with small touches that are pointless in isolation but help build the idea of who your character is and who you want your character to be. Ellen Page also tackles her role as Jodie Holmes with a real gusto, both surprising and pleasing. She takes her role seriously and naturally, as a result of this, you feel inclined to take her character seriously too.**

There are also some clear problems with *Beyond*. Some of the slowdown QTEs are too ambiguous in nature and the lack of consequence makes action sequences feel flat. Playing as Aiden is more hunt-the-blue-dot mini-game than it is a natural extension of Jodie and the final third of *Beyond* can only be described as 'doing a *Fahrenheit*'. If you played *Fahrenheit*, you'll understand exactly what that means. But it's not the flaws that make *Beyond* interesting. It's the reaction to the reviews.

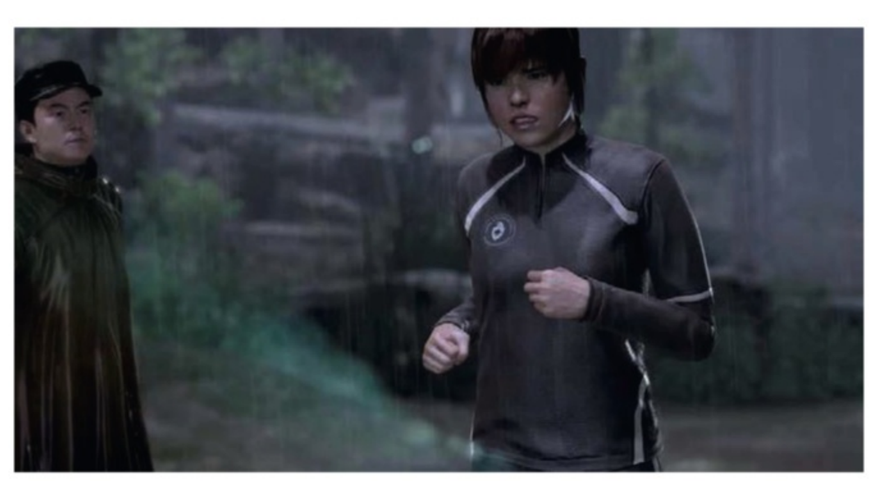
Beyond scored 8/10 in this magazine. Elsewhere, reviews ranged from 3s to 9s, making it one of the more polarising titles in recent times. This should have served as the starting point for a healthy discussion about games – what they should achieve, what they are achieving, what they aspire to be, and so on, with *Beyond*'s success (or lack of it) used as a case study of sorts. Instead, what we got was vitriolic, knee-jerk "Ha, told you so!" shouts of triumph from those waiting for David Cage to trip up. How disappointing.

> In talking up Beyond, Cage has eclipsed his own game

As someone who is openly honest about his ambitions for games – and not just his own – David Cage is an easy target. He talks about emotion and that serves a trigger-word for mockery in certain circles. As the writer for *Fahrenheit*, *Heavy Rain* and *Beyond: Two Souls*, David Cage has shown that perhaps his ambitions elude what he is ultimately capable of.

Cage's rhetoric is remarkably similar to that of Peter Molyneux and we suspect now that Molyneux has jumped off the triple-A hamster wheel and almost completely removed himself from the internet firing line, David Cage is the convenient replacement for forum tirades and over-the-top abuse. It's worth noting that *Beyond* isn't nearly as ambitious as David Cage, or even Sony, might suggest it is. It's far too close to *Heavy Rain* and *Fahrenheit* to suggest that something new is being attempted. *Beyond* doesn't explore new territory for David Cage, nor does it strive for any news standards in narrative or gameplay. It's also a little easier to rally against the *Call Of Duty*s and *Battlefield*s of this world when your paymasters are willing to sign cheques that allow you to chase household names like Ellen Page and Willem Dafoe.

But should games be judged against the words of their creator? Perhaps that's the most disappointing aspect of the reaction. In talking up *Beyond: Two Souls*, Cage has ultimately eclipsed his own game, his presence distorting any valid criticism into something needlessly personal and unfair. Sony deserves kudos for supporting such an unusual venture, as does Quantic Dream for creating high-profile titles that remain different to the games industry norm, while other series reconfigure themselves to capture the *Call Of Duty* crowd (*Resident Evil*, *Dead Space*, etc). And for that, at the very least – at the very *least* – *Beyond: Two Souls* deserves to be examined entirely on its own merits, away from hysterical criticism aimed at Cage.



■ *Beyond* is apparently engaging, dull, unrealistic, too realistic… It divided critics, in other words.

Ryan King is editor of NOWGamer.com

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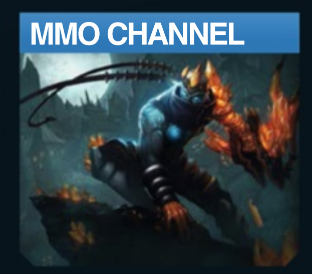
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GAME DEV STORY

with Q-Games' James Mielke

Event Rising: Japan's Indie Scene



As I write this I am in the middle of a trans-Pacific move from Kyoto to New York. I'm moving home, after 14 years away, having worked for Gamespot, EGM, 1UP, Q Entertainment, and finally, Q-Games in Kyoto. I'm going home for family and professional reasons, but despite saying goodbye to my friends and family in Japan, I am not leaving BitSummit, the indie game festival I started with the help of Q-Games. Japan's indie scene is finally gaining traction, more eyes are picking up on movement in Japan's underground development scene, and I am determined to see exciting new indie releases get the same level of coverage that their Western counterparts have been enjoying for years.

Although Japan's independent game development scene existed long before BitSummit, with regular events like Comiket, among many others, producing a venue for indies (more specifically 'doujin', or amateur developers) to market their wares to the public, these pre-existing events were geared towards a domestic fanbase. BitSummit's purpose was to draw the gaze of the Western media away from the so-called 'stagnant' top tier publishers like Sega, Namco, and Capcom, and redirect them towards the hungry, ambitious, small teams working on original games in their spare time. There was innovation and fresh thinking to be found in Japan, and BitSummit simply wanted to put a magnifying glass on it.

In the three quarters of a year since BitSummit debuted in March, I've received thankful e-mails from developers who, in attending events like Comiket, have sold out of their stock of games completely, and credited BitSummit with helping to raise awareness, both internationally and domestically, thanks to coverage in publications like Famitsu and 4Gamer. I've also received correspondence from other developers who were in attendance at our event, who've said the positive impact from BitSummit has helped their games in crowdfunding efforts and getting traction in things like Steam's Greenlight process. This is exactly what I was hoping for when we started BitSummit, and the momentum continues to build.

> There was innovation to be found in Japan, and BitSummit wanted to put a magnifying glass on it

Only a couple of weeks ago, on the final day of Tokyo Game Show, Sony, Playism (a Japanese digital game publisher, and localisation team), and Unity Japan held an indies event at Sony HQ in Shinagawa. I had met with all three parties prior to the event (called 'IndieStream') and they told me that BitSummit was their model and inspiration for IndieStream, and were hoping that this would serve as a bridge to BitSummit II, and invited me to attend and promote the follow-up event to the masses. As it turned out, the masses needed little convincing.

When word got out that I was "the guy" from BitSummit, devs by the dozen lined up to give me their cards – some of whom I already knew from the first event – and many others who couldn't attend the inaugural show. Most encouragingly, some high profile indies from Japan, like 'ZUN' aka 'Team Shanghai Alice', told me he was looking forward to attending BitSummit II. That was huge, for me, because he is truly the godfather of Japan's indies, and to have him there pretty much validates the whole event. If ZUN will attend, then everyone else will and BitSummit will have truly arrived.

But it wasn't until the end of the IndieStream event, when a couple other core members of the BitSummit crew got up on stage (I heard this second-hand as I had already left by then to return home to Kyoto to take care of my newborn son) to say a few words about why everyone there should attend BitSummit II, and upon hearing the phrase "BitSummit" the crowd erupted in cheers. How could I ever leave such an important movement in gaming behind? Well, I can't, and that's why I will return to Kyoto in March to orchestrate the final motions in the symphony of sight and sound that will be BitSummit MMXIV – Sound & Vision: Kyoto Indie Game Festival.

It will be an amazing event, for sure. Not only will we have around 100 indie development teams in attendance, but we should feature performances by Masaya Matsuura (PaRappa The Rapper creator), Professor Sakamoto (musical star from the first BitSummit), Baiyon (the composer of *PixelJunk Eden*), and I Am Robot and Proud (*Sound Shapes*). We'll also have special guests, like Tetsuya Mizuguchi, John Baez (from The Behemoth), and hopefully a few other surprises and guests from the West. It's an honour to be a part of a revolution and that's what it is like, to see this taking place in Japan. It's a coming out party for a whole new generation of gaming talent, and that's a great, great thing.

James Mielke is a producer at Q-Games



COME TOGETHER

■ THE DESCRIPTION of Japan's indie scene as a 'scene' has, up until now, really been something of a misnomer. Notoriously reticent to share, collaborate or commiserate amongst each other, many Japanese developers, like Crispy's Yohei Kataoka (*Tokyo Jungle*), weren't even really aware that such a scene existed. But between events like BitSummit and IndieStream promoting the collective existence of the indie community, with technology like Unity 3D and Unreal Engine making inroads as a tech solution for indie devs, and with powerhouses like Sony recognising the importance of indie exclusives on their consoles, the 'scene' is indeed galvanising. As they say, there is strength in numbers, and Japan's indie developers are recognising this. At BitSummit MMXIV, we should see perhaps the largest industry gathering of Japanese indies yet. March 2014 can't come soon enough.

Five Things About

Lego Marvel Superheroes

Having enjoyed incredible success within the *Harry Potter, Star Wars*, DC, *Lord of the Rings* and *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchises, Traveller's Tales has turned its attention to Marvel's extensive universe. We caught up with the game's director, Arthur Parsons, to chat heroes and villains…

1 On upgrading the engine to run the game…

We've done a lot of work under the bonnet; gotten some post-effects stuff working, implemented some new lighting tricks, and used a lot of clever stuff with [physics] to make sure we're getting bang-for-our-buck with Lego pieces. We've got the Sandman level, for example – when the Sandman explodes, it's all Lego bits; seven- or eight-thousand individual pieces right there, not including the rest of the Lego in the environment.

2 On teaching children how to play with such a huge cast…

From day one we've been conscious of not wanting to make the younger audience panic, as such. You can get overwhelmed – we want to make sure that as players come to the game, everything seems natural. We give them characters we know they'll recognise – the Hulk, Iron Man, Spider-man. We sit with kids quite a lot and get them to play [the game] – if they get stuck then we know we need to fix it.

3 On appealing to a wider audience…

The Free Play aspect of the game is where there's a lot of crazy characters; that's there for the people that want to keep pushing the game – the completionists, the Marvel fans – they'll go and find all this extra stuff. The younger audience, though, they're going to be reasonably familiar with the things they see earlier on. With Marvel, there's a *huge* adult fanbase; people are so particular with it, too – they know every single detail [about the universe] and our game does that world justice.

4 On connections to the Marvel Cinematic Universe…

We talk to Marvel every week, we have a really good relationship with them. We know that *Captain America 2: The Winter Soldier* is out in February, so we've got content that dives into the movie. We've got Silver Samurai and Viper in there from the new Wolverine movie, we've got content in from *Thor: The Dark World.* Our games have an incredibly long shelf life – we want to make sure it's current for as long as it can be.

5 On the possibility of a Marvel/DC crossover…

At the minute, we're firmly focused on the Marvel game, but we'll see what kind of reception this gets… that's all I'll say for now.

"Our games have an incredibly long shelf life – we want to make sure it's current for as long as it can be"
Arthur Parsons, Traveller's Tales Games



How free is free-to-play?

→ With more and more publishers opting to offer free games and charge for freemium content (*PlanetSide 2* as an example), we wondered if the F2P model is offering more variety to gamers or making our industry into a cash cow. We let you decide…

■ Anything that requires constant payments in order to continue playing or progress is worse than nothing. **@Dookie3000, Twitter**

■ We can't make a profit selling games for £30 so we'll give them away and hope we can nickel & dime everyone to make it up. **@the_spad, Twitter**

■ *Plants vs Zombies 2* is a good example of how to ruin a potentially great game with awful IAPs. **@peoww, Twitter**

■ I would rather spend money on a game designed around fun than one continually trying extract cash from my wallet. **@RetroBob, Twitter**

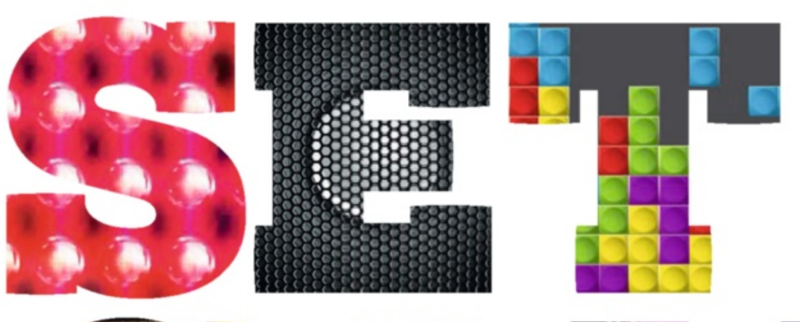
■ Free to Play is just Pay to Win. I will often enjoy a F2P game right up to the point that it becomes necessary to pay **@IainOakley, Twitter**

■ I stay away. Micro transactions can get seriously out of hand, especially where kids are involved. Or maybe I'm just a stuck-in-the-mud traditionalist. Now excuse me while I go and play on my Mega Drive… **Andy O'Flaherty, Facebook**

■ I like them as long as you can progress without buying. Many a game has stopped me playing as I've had to pay for content. In-app purchases should be to enhance an experience or as a collectible, not as a necessity. **Chris Huggett, Facebook**

■ But you get to play games for free! Not all are monetised badly. See *PVZ 2*. **@pikapies, Twitter**

■ There are some incredibly high quality F2Ps. Lots of MMOs that started as big budget titles. *War Thunder/Warframe* are great. **@ZeroMark26, Twitter**



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- Tom Clancy's The Division

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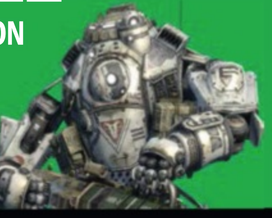


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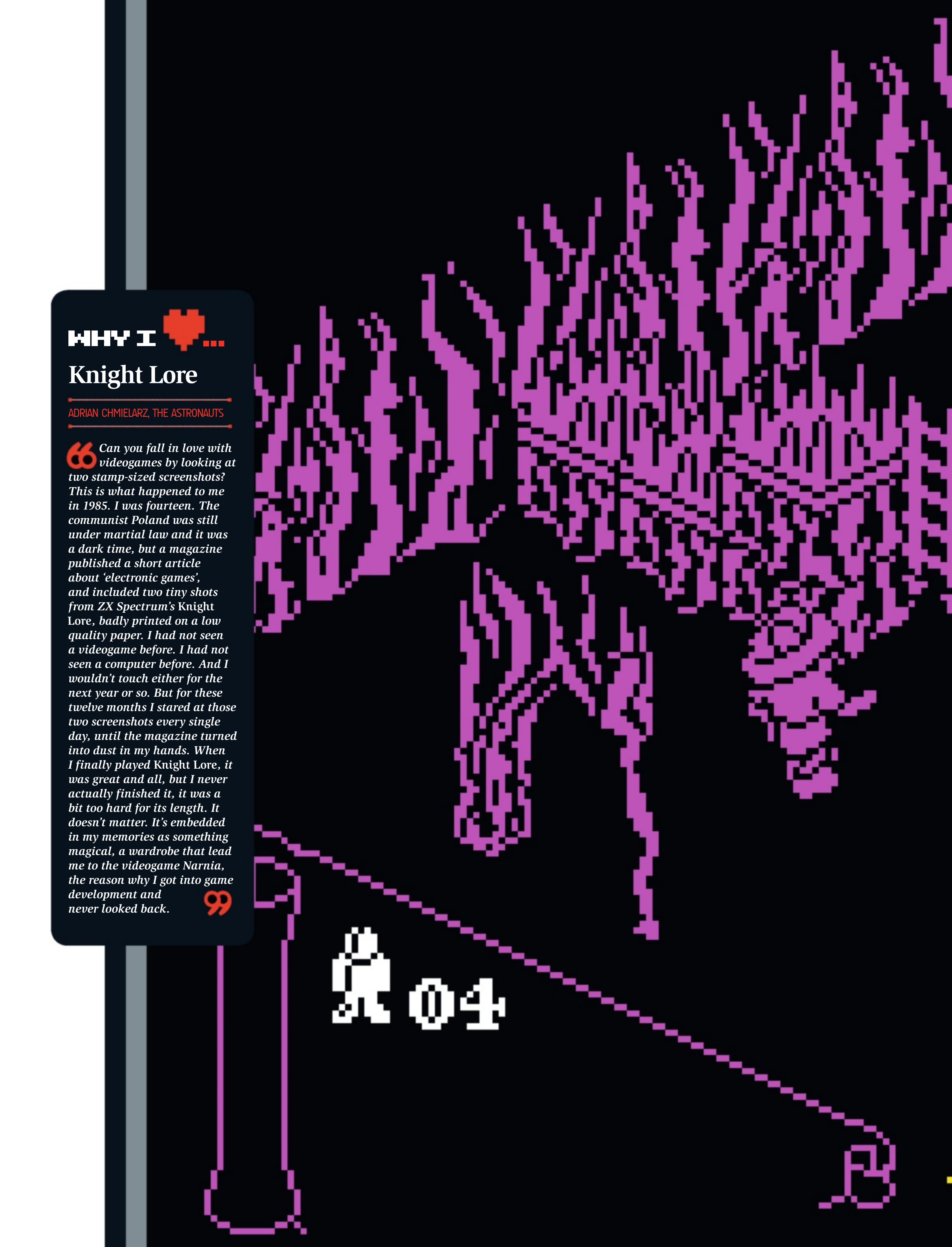

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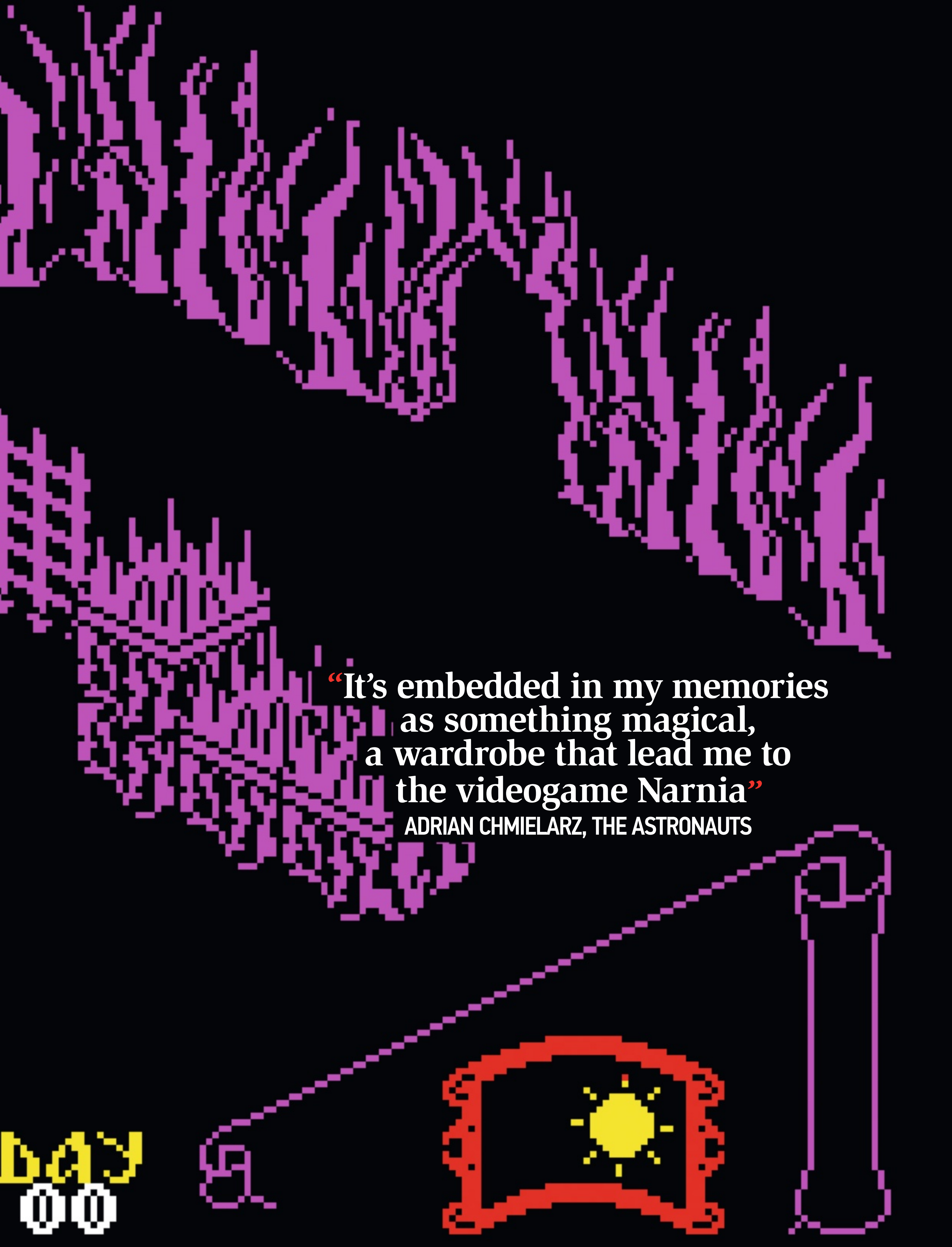


WHY I ❤...

Knight Lore

ADRIAN CHMIELARZ, THE ASTRONAUTS

“*Can you fall in love with videogames by looking at two stamp-sized screenshots? This is what happened to me in 1985. I was fourteen. The communist Poland was still under martial law and it was a dark time, but a magazine published a short article about ‘electronic games’, and included two tiny shots from ZX Spectrum’s* Knight Lore*, badly printed on a low quality paper. I had not seen a videogame before. I had not seen a computer before. And I wouldn’t touch either for the next year or so. But for these twelve months I stared at those two screenshots every single day, until the magazine turned into dust in my hands. When I finally played* Knight Lore*, it was great and all, but I never actually finished it, it was a bit too hard for its length. It doesn’t matter. It’s embedded in my memories as something magical, a wardrobe that lead me to the videogame Narnia, the reason why I got into game development and never looked back.*”



"It's embedded in my memories as something magical, a wardrobe that lead me to the videogame Narnia"

ADRIAN CHMIELARZ, THE ASTRONAUTS

THE ARRIVAL

PlayStation 4 and Xbox One are finally here. So what are Sony and Microsoft doing to earn your money?



There's something quite special about the moment a new console arrives in your life. Holding it in your hands for the first time, studying the weight of the box still concealed within its sturdy cardboard wrapping before poring over every last detail of its packaging; delicately unpacking its wires and doodads before the console itself is unsheathed and connected to the television, illuminating the screen for the very first time. It's a palpable instance of excitement as gliding through its menus reveals a bewitching glance at its potential, of the adventures destined to be experienced in the years ahead. It's a moment that most gamers would agree is incomparable.

After what has seemed an endless wait, Sony's PlayStation 4 and Microsoft's Xbox One finally arrive this month and pinned to both of them is the promise of a new golden era of game design, as the worlds get bigger, the mechanics run deeper and the shiny stuff gets a lot shinier. Much has been made of the two rival systems – how Sony's cultivation of indie development challenges Microsoft's corporate front, or whether Sony can compete with Xbox One's impressive, exclusive-laden launch window line-up – but these points of difference seem almost irrelevant. Both systems boast a wealth of heady features that means, whichever side you pick, *you* win. It's as simple as that. **games™** has spoken to Sony, Microsoft, and some of the most talented teams across the world, about PlayStation 4 and Xbox One, unearthing how the new systems have motivated developers to push the boundaries of interactive entertainment. Brace yourself, because the times they are-a-changin'. »


SONY
PS4



Enemy sizes can be a lot bigger than they were in *Halo*, in the realms of something like *Borderlands*, suitable for a co-op experience.

NEXT-GEN: WHAT WILL IT DO FOR GAME DESIGN?

Xbox One and PS4 developers at **Ubisoft Montreal, Bungie, Ghost Games, Guerrilla Games** and more weigh in on the benefits of the new consoles, and how they will transform game design forever…

If there's one slight disappointment about the run up to the launch of this new generation, it's the fact that games are so expensive now that cross-gen titles seem to have become a necessity. As promising as some of these generation-straddling titles look – *Watch Dogs*, *Thief* and *The Evil Within* as just a few examples – we can't help but think about what these games could be like if they weren't also being made on consoles that have long been surpassed by the PC market. Of course, while we expect this trend to last a little longer to mitigate the risk of big budget development, there are still games that are just intended for next-gen that echo some of the potential of what we're going to see in the next five-to-ten years.

We've just had *GTA V* show us the very endgame of achievement on antiquated hardware; when you think about the future in that

Destiny looks like a catch-all sci-fi universe, with the kind of scope that can hopefully be relied upon for a decade of stories.

Player expression in multiplayer will be paramount in *Destiny*, to feel like you own part of the vast fictional universe that has been created.

Taking an extra few years for the last generation has had its advantages – new franchises like *Destiny* will arrive early this time.

context, and the kind of titles that could represent that peak of ambitious game design on these new consoles, it's scarily exciting. What will a Bethesda or Rockstar-created open world look like? What scale of ghastly creatures will we be facing down in *Dark Souls III*? Those kinds of questions are why we're so excited about owning new consoles. We're about to enter a new phase of gaming culture and our interactive experiences will change forever, even those that are extensions of familiar genres – Xbox One and PS4 are certain to offer the designers we respect more capacity for achievement than ever before.

Yet this generation is packed with unknown quantities. Motion control, still considered a sigh in gaming form by anyone who's logically followed its trajectory during the last five years, needs to broaden its appeal beyond the tasteless masses. Technology like Oculus Rift has impressed us at every showing to date, and the quality of virtual reality experiences appears set to soar in the next few years, with Sony's own 3D headset also set to muscle in on the action. Plus, with indie games becoming crucial in Sony's tubthumping conferences, and the indie scene itself turned into something of a chew toy for Sony and Microsoft to fight a PR war over, these developers seem poised to fill the space left vacant by double-A games. Will Amazon enter the games market? Will Valve muscle its way into the living room?

Snake returns on PS4 and Xbox One, David Hayter-less but Kiefer Sutherland-full,

"Will Amazon enter the games market? Will Valve muscle its way into the living room?"

Yet the best way for Xbox One and PS4 to demonstrate their relevance is, of course, through strong game design. Let's focus on what today's big developers think of the new consoles, how the power of the new hardware informs the games they can create, which areas of design they can further and what challenges they face in adapting to PlayStation 4 and Xbox One.

Environmental design, of course, is a huge part of the potential of next gen. What can be achieved with an open world on PS4 and Xbox One, how scale and detail will increase. Fredrik Rundqvist, producer of *The Division*, one of E3 2013's marquee game announcements, says that potential is conveyed through the scope of the world in his pre-apocalyptic MMO-alike. "I think it's the sheer size of it, and within that how many people can be online at the same time, how immersive you can make the world, and keep it one large map at the same time," he explains. "It's [set in] the greater New York area, not just Manhattan. We want to showcase all the different biomes. It's a very rich biome type of situation around New York, the iconic Manhattan that everybody in the world knows, you have the forests, the parks, the beaches. The big harbours, the big airports. All these different biomes we want the gamers to be able to explore."

The Division is targeting a late 2014 release on both new formats, but Ubisoft's upcoming output is a little more platform agnostic. For *Assassin's Creed IV*, a launch game also releasing on current gen, it's about using the machines for more cosmetic additions, since gameplay remains the same across all versions. "For now we are pretty proud with the edge or the differentiation between the next gen and current gen," says producer Martin Schelling. "The current gen is looking pretty good, the next-gen experience is just a little enhanced and better. During the development smaller laboratories explore different things. One group will focus on the weather system, working on their prototypes and experimentation. Then we try to push the lighting to the maximum so that characters are reacting to the light and all those baby steps are coming from the laboratories and these small cells of the development team… we added new explosions for the ships and it's just crazy, there's so much going on."

Publishers are realistic about the adoption rate of next-gen, it seems. In an industry where two major players met their demise during the last generation, the obvious goal of cross-gen games is to maximise profits but minimise risk. And you can't hold that against them, really, considering the stakes involved in making a game with $20 million+ budget. And besides, the aesthetic benefit »

THE BIG HITTERS

The games we expect to define next-gen early on (but reserve the right to change our minds about if they're not very good)



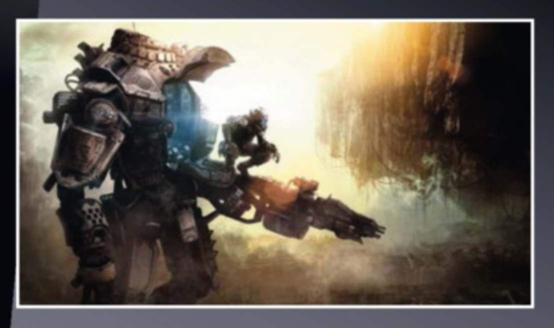
WATCH DOGS

1 Delayed until Spring next year, the delay of *Watch Dogs* will have taken the wind out of the sails of the next-gen launch for some people. Fair enough; each showing of the game does impress us, though getting out the way of *Assassin's Creed IV* might've been a smart move by Ubisoft. Its financial results imply they're expecting big things.

THE WITCHER 3: WILD HUNT

2 Smartly getting here before Bethesda, CD Projekt RED has garnered a fair amount of attention with its next-gen-only fantasy RPG for those console owners waiting for a single-player *Elder Scrolls* fix – not to mention the series' own enormous PC-based fanbase who love *The Witcher* anyway.





FINAL FANTASY XV

3 "If you saw the presentation of the city, it would knock off your feet," said former Square Enix head Yoichi Wada earlier this year about the game that would become *Final Fantasy XV*. With large-scale, real-time battles and huge environments, eight years of development makes us hopeful for this sequel, though our feet remain very much intact.



TITANFALL

4 A fan-favourite already after plenty of public showings, Respawn's FPS is looking like a huge coup for Microsoft. This may end up being the shot in the arm to the multiplayer FPS that people didn't realise it needed. The Spring timing works well for us – the last thing the launch window needs is more FPS juggernauts.



DESTINY

5 Designed to gestate as a ten-year ongoing experience, Bungie's *Destiny* will therefore make more sense on a console you'll potentially own for ten years as opposed to one that'll just be used for backwards compatibility in a couple of years' time. A potential winner from the esteemed creators of *Halo*, we'll be getting it on Xbox One & PS4.



● We expect *Call Of Duty* to be a massive force on Xbox One and PS4, though for the first time in years, Activision faces real competition.

» of PS4 and Xbox One isn't an asset to be underestimated, even if you can own the game on your existing consoles. "[For next-gen], we push the envelope on visuals, for example, on loading times, on streaming," says Eidos Montreal's Joe Khoury, currently working on *Thief*. "On a bunch of more technical features that allow the whole experience to be a little more quick than the limitations you have on current-gen consoles. At the same time, we keep the basic mechanics – the *feel* of the game – the same on both current- and next-gen consoles."

Generally speaking, and not in reference to any specific developer, the two stock responses on the question of why a game is either next gen-only or cross-gen comes down to some version of the following, respectively: a) "We want to make the most of new technology" or b) "we want as many people to play our games as possible." Not that we're expecting them to say, "actually, it's a real drag having to make games for outmoded consoles when the new machines will fly off the shelves," but we do wonder how games like *Oblivion* or *Gears* would've been limited last generation if they were also released on PS2 and Xbox. That's the equivalent of what we're seeing in cross-gen games; a nice democratic gesture, in extending the lifespan of what you've already spent hundreds of pounds on, but not quite as energising to consumers hungry for this much-hyped hardware. Still, there is a subset of developers who are using the transition to experiment

Given the worth of *Call Of Duty* as a franchise and the casual nature of some of its audience, we don't expect a next gen-only version for years.

Has Riley's debut in *Call Of Duty: Ghosts* been dramatically upstaged by the sheer doggy charisma of last-gen Chop in *Grand Theft Auto V*?

> "Destiny's multiplayer certainly seems poised to usher in an age of persistent worlds"

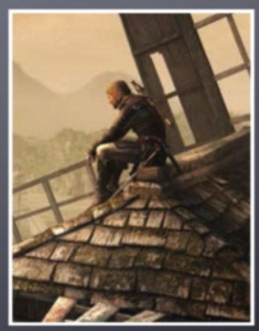
with ideas that will be crucial in the next few years of game design, across a number of different game types.

For the *Need For Speed* franchise, which has always been ahead of the curve when it comes to the structure of multiplayer, such experimentation will be present in this year's *Rivals* and should play a part in future entries, too. "That's when we started thinking 'Okay, what do we not like about the games that we're doing now?'" says Marcus Nilsson, executive producer, explaining how the team first approached the new consoles. "'Alright, I don't like this, I don't like this. Okay.' But then we really started playing *Most Wanted* and we were driving around and having a good time but also we realised why do we have to have a single-player and a multiplayer experience? Why do I have to go into a lobby to wait for someone to join the game? Couldn't we just pull that out? Wouldn't that be a really next generation thing to do? So we did that. We started to create this AllDrive world where you can play and I can seamlessly, without even knowing, be put in your world and I can play my single player then we can meet. So it's player action taken from single player to a multiplayer experience.

"Really, what we created with *Rivals* is without gender, if you want. It's not single player. It's not multiplayer. It's not really co-op. It is a *Need For Speed* experience but you choose how to experience it." Indeed, not every innovation is to do with bigger worlds and more detailed visuals so far when it comes to next-gen, and *Rivals* looks to expand its multiplayer philosophies in a fashion that fits the progressive arc of that big-budget franchise.

In the multiplayer space, we're seeing a lot of developers trying to enhance the player's relationship with the world, and sharing that kind of approach towards blurring single-player and online is Bungie's *Destiny*, which will introduce a persistent multiplayer world to a genre not typically associated with that concept. If a success, *Destiny*'s paradigm for multiplayer certainly seems poised to usher in an age where this plays a greater role in the FPS overall.

"The great thing for us with timing is that we were making a new engine, and then two new consoles were coming out, which led us to invest more into making the new engine for it," Bungie president Harold Ryan told **games™** earlier this year. "There are a whole bunch of great opportunities for us to go after, like full player experiences, etc. We're investigating all of those and building the core experience of *Destiny*, which will be similar across all the platforms. The graphics are different, obviously, platform to »



Assassin's Creed IV has the honour of being the first next-gen game reviewed by games™.



Wolfenstein is among the games that were built to scale well across platforms with its latest id Tech.

> "New thinking is a big part of why we get excited about next-gen… new consoles tend to coincide with a creative renaissance of software"

● Geralt's range of animations in *The Witcher 3* is the sort of subtle feature that impresses about next-gen – details that make the difference.

● With a now impressive background in RPG making, *The Witcher 3* promises to take the remarkable world-building of *The Witcher 2* to a larger scale.

» platform, but in a connected world, the game of *Destiny* is going to be awesome on all of them."

Popular genres usually experience a culture change between generations, and both *Destiny* and Microsoft exclusive *Titanfall* offer different ways that the FPS could evolve. For *Titanfall*, it's mixing parkour with multiplayer combat, extending the value of your health so you live a bit longer and then finally, perhaps the most likely to cribbed by idea-dry competitors, the epilogue retreat mechanic where the losing team has to escape the battlefield. We've played *Titanfall* among many other players, and the reaction to this final idea is so strong that we can easily see it being as influential to the course of multiplayer design as kill streak awards in *COD4*.

New thinking is a big part of why we should get excited about next-gen, and the advent of new consoles tends to coincide with a creative renaissance of software as publishers look for a way to get a foothold in the market. "It was really good news for us when we saw the architecture Microsoft and Sony went for because, back in 2009 when we started building our engines, we had no certainty that there would be a next generation," *Watch Dogs* producer Dominic Guay tells us. "So we built our guesstimate next-gen build on PC and



● *Need For Speed: Rivals* is cross-gen, but after playing the PS4 version it's pretty hard to see ourselves going back to an Xbox 360 or PS3 edition.

when the hardware specs were announced, it was pretty close to the targets we had. So that was good news. The platforms are also quite accessible – they don't have any technical hurdles to jump over when using them, so that's good because we're trying to ship this huge open-world launch title, so you don't want hardware that's not going to be accessible. Both have their specific specs, too, and I'm sure we're going to be able to exploit those over time."

Watch Dogs is the same across all versions, mission-wise, but the Xbox One and PS4 editions seem more appealing when you consider the advanced content in terms of civilian AI, animation and atmospheric touches to the city. They're the type of features we might expect from a game that's just made for next gen.

Yet conversely, it's hard not to be more excited for those games that have been tailor-made for PS4 and Xbox One. *Killzone: Shadow Fall* developers Guerrilla Games, who are making their first open-structured FPS, believe that the benefits of next-gen tech will obviously manifest themselves in the product. "Our AI has always been of a certain standard where we want them to flank the player and provide a proper challenge and be responsive and humanlike," he says. "When you scale up the environment it's a lot trickier to understand where the player is going to be and how the AI responds. There are all sorts of issues we didn't have to worry about before that we now have to take into account so it takes a lot of testing. It's about finding that balance between letting you do things your own way and at the same time testing it and prototyping it and making sure everything works!"

One island in *The Witcher 3* is bigger than the entirety of *The Witcher 2* put together. We sense *Wild Hunt* will find a bigger audience this time.

"New IP, usually conducive to brand new gameplay ideas, is a complex and expensive business"

Console manufacturers, of course, are smart enough to know that cross-gen titles would only undermine the message of the capabilities of Xbox One and PS4. While the launch titles seem pretty safe in subject matter (driving, shooting, zombies), they're technically amazing to look at, generally speaking – but if we look at our top 20 defining games of the last generation from a few issues ago, none of them were released in the first two years of the consoles' lifecycle. Evolution takes time, and the process of making a big budget game is riskier now than it ever was. At the start of the last generation, Namco Bandai's Takeo Takasu said that a release would need to sell 500,000 copies to break even; at the climax of this generation, *Tomb Raider* can sell 3 million and not be deemed a success. New IP, which is usually (but not exclusively) conducive to brand new gameplay ideas, is therefore a complex and expensive business.

You've heard a lot from Sony and later Microsoft about the importance of indie games, and yes, the last few years of PSN and Xbox Live Arcade imply that you don't need to be a big release to be culturally important to the medium. Yet don't count big boxed games out when it comes to innovation – it is these developers who will evoke wonder by demonstrating the highest end technical capabilities of Xbox One and PS4, and while familiar experiences will undoubtedly be a large part of that, we can already see how the genres we love may be enhanced by the new platforms in creatively worthy ways. Is that enough for you to spend £350 or £430?

Avalanche is working on *Mad Max* and a comic book licence project on next-gen. They've denied it, but we still think the latter is a *Superman* game.

CONSOLE LAUNCH: PLAYSTATION 4

After a turbulent last-generation launch, is Sony back on top with PlayStation 4 as the gamer's choice?

The DualShock 4 seems to be provoking a divisive response when it's publicly demoed, but the weight and size of it works for modern games.

When viewed from a certain perspective, a console launch has a lot in common with an electoral campaign. Just look at how hardware manufacturers use a series of platforms to bluster and make puffed-up assertions about their upcoming product, eagerly soliciting votes and support in a PR blitzkrieg tightly spun to maintain headway against the competition.

The big three – that being Nintendo, Microsoft and Sony – all share this approach in a distinctive fashion tailored towards their individual consoles, but the end result is much the same, as each demonstrates value and promises consumers to fulfil every desire and demand in the months leading up to launch.

It's well documented that Sony achieved an early lead on its major competitor, the Xbox One, and while its championing of indie development is admirable, in hindsight the industry's fixation on PlayStation 4's stance on trade-ins and always-online was excessive. Maybe Sony would've relied on those early boons had Microsoft not put its own policies in turnaround, but PlayStation 4 had no such luxury as recent months has seen the gulf separating the two consoles close significantly.

So where did Sony go from here? Well, it was a matter of consistency – the one thing that PlayStation 4 had over its rival; a clarity of vision evident from the outset that has not only positioned it favourably for the future, but was indicative of an approach manifested in response to the mistakes made in the company's past.

"When you go into a new chapter, you have to take stock and think, 'What are the areas for improvement?'" says Sony's Fergal Gara, chatting to **games™** in the company's London offices. "When you've got strong competition, it's very important to launch in a timely manner, and it's fantastic that with the PlayStation 4 we've managed to get to market at the same time [as Xbox One]. With pricing, that's an area where we were on the high side last time, so trying to achieve all of that power – which should come as standard and expected for a next-generation console – to do that and do it at a key price is where you challenge a business to do its best. It's crucial to remember who we're trying to reach in the first place; we're trying to reach gamers. We've got to understand what's going to appeal most to them. Above all other things – the shininess of the box, the price point of the box – it's the experience gamers can have with that box that'll be most appealing to them. Who creates the experiences for the gamer? It's the game developers. So giving them the best and most flexible canvas for them to make their art on was hugely important."

> "First and foremost we want to re-establish our credentials as owning the top-tier experience in gaming"

Long gone are the troubles of PlayStation 3's launch: several months of delays, an inflated price tag and a series of supercilious assertions from Sony Computer Entertainment chief Ken Kutaragi – all seemingly remedied for the next gen through immediacy and consumer-friendly marketability. But let's not forget what's important: the console, or more crucially, as Gara highlights, the software running on it. Guerrilla Games and SCE Japan (*DriveClub* is delayed) are the two in-house studios in charge of representing the first-party launch titles and Gara is keen to point out the multifarious nature of the line-up. "It's important to have certain key, core genres at the start of a life cycle," he explains. "It's important to have software that shows off the new features of the hardware »



The console feels like a sign of the times: economic but sleek, a big contrast to the over-varnished indulgent madness of the 2006 PS3.

If size is a factor for you, the PS4 is indeed a lot smaller than the Xbox One. Our cover is to scale, it turns out – the PS4 may look better under your TV.





DriveClub's recent delay means the PS4 will be weak on day one, but still strong during its launch window. Will *Knack* and *Killzone* get you to buy a PS4?





InFamous: Second Son looks like the best of Sony's initial bunch of titles, with a detailed-looking open world and gorgeous effects.

on the console itself," Gara says. "With *Killzone: Shadow Fall*, I think you'll see the user interface come to life – well, I think you'll see two major things. One, I think it's possibly the most stunning next-generation title I've seen in terms of pure graphical resolution; it's absolutely exceptional and stands tall alongside everything else that's coming to market. The other thing that'll work really well is the personalised features. Through the new user interface you can see the live gameplay from your friends, and it's so compelling that you'll want to jump into what they're playing right away to be part of that experience. They're just two examples. With *Knack*, it's very important to PlayStation to be at our best in this cycle. We've always aimed to be a broad-church in terms of the people who play on our platforms, and I think having *Knack* proves some of the technical prowess of the machine – with regards to the rendering itself around Knack, the character – but more importantly, it allows us to engage gamers, and the family audience, right from the start."

It's not just the triple-A behemoths that have Sony feeling confident for its 29 November launch in the UK, supporting its first-party pedigree with a slew of partnerships with independent developers, each bringing their own unique flavour to the system. It's a move that telegraphs what is likely to be the continued ascent of indie gaming; however, there is trepidation that the middle-tier developers will continue to diminish. Gara acknowledges the conundrum, but he suggests that the next-gen hardware will not only cultivate indie development but will also stimulate growth in what is becoming a bleak 'double-A' market, even if that space becomes occupied by smaller teams in the future.

"I don't expect the big blockbusters die out any time soon. I think we'll see a much more rich and fertile middle ground," he says. "We're talking about anything from free-to-play and very low price points for short and quick experiences right up to filling all the gaps – up to that blockbuster price point. The middle ground may be more populated by what they call indie publishers, rather than what we'd call the medium-tier traditional publishers, for want of a better word."

"This [is] the most powerful console that has ever been launched"



Will this big box be joining the extensive console line-up under your TV in the next few months?

The relationship between consoles and third-party publishers has withstood the most dramatic changes over the past hardware cycle. The business side has often nipped at the heel of the creative: projects abandoned, studios forced into closure and where once we'd expect a healthy and competitive series of major franchise platform exclusives to sit on a console's release schedule, DLC and timed-exclusives have almost completely replaced the notion. It's unlikely that we will see publishers prepared to commit to third-party platform exclusives at a similar level as before, but it does exist – Xbox One has Capcom's *Dead Rising 3* and Respawn's *Titanfall* in its launch window. In a time when it's critical for Sony to further distance itself from its main competitor, is the company missing a trick?

"From a business perspective does it make sense to be on one platform or more and why is it better to limit yourself to part of the market than the whole of the market?" asks Gara when we ask the question. "Occasionally that may make sense and back in the PlayStation 2 days it was perhaps an easier decision when the relative market shares meant that if you were heavily backed by PlayStation, leaving the smaller part of the market wasn't a big thing to forgo. More balanced competition means those decisions have to be thought about a bit more. We see points of difference carved out on third-party titles that, while not totally exclusive, have exclusive points to them." Of course, Microsoft has that too in the form of *Call Of Duty* and *Battlefield* map packs, but it's interesting to note that the type of games Sony has struck deals over in this field are a bit more leftfield.

PLAYSTATION 4'S FIRST STAGE

Sony's launch window line-up is a reflection of its catch-all approach to the market, making its gambit a tantalising prospect for everyone



DRIVECLUB Evolution Studios

The studio has apparently been stewing on the idea behind this driving simulator for close to a decade, hinging on social interactivity to fuel its engine. Certainly it's the one title that is set to get the most out of PlayStation 4's new interface and social features, and Evolution's pedigree in the genre ensures that it'll be nothing if not a slick racer.



KNACK SCE Japan

Mark Cerny's pet project has spawned into one of PlayStation 4's most intriguing titles. The eponymous creature at the centre of this whimsical platformer can incorporate wood, ice, metal and other materials into his body, meaning he can grow to enormous proportions. There's a touch of *Katamari Damacy* to the design, not to mention a helping of pre-*Uncharted* Naughty Dog.



KILLZONE: SHADOW FALL Guerrilla Games

Sony hasn't had much luck with its first-party shooter franchises, and *Killzone* has always been the best of an underperforming bunch. However, Sony is pegging its hopes on its PlayStation 4 sequel, boasting some of the best next-gen visuals seen to date and an extensive overhaul of multiplayer that is vying for the attention of the *COD* crowd.

THE ORDER: 1886 Ready At Dawn

The most mysterious title heading to PS4 during its nascent days, *The Order* spins a tale of an alternative history where steampunk weaponry is used to keep Victorian monsters at bay. Little has been shown, but it's indicative of Sony's commitment to generating new IP.

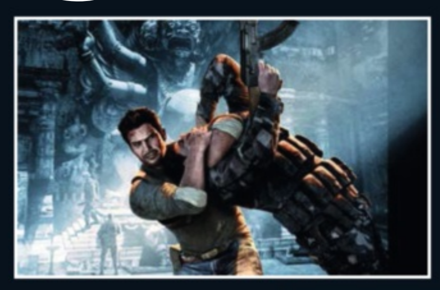




INFAMOUS: SECOND SON Sucker Punch Productions

While Sucker Punch still has difficulty creating a lead that is even remotely likable, a huge open-world environment (the first designed specifically for PlayStation 4) and a suite of superhuman abilities – which'll enable players to feel a level of empowerment not previously reached – leverage that problem.

5 EXCLUSIVES THAT WILL DEFINE PS4

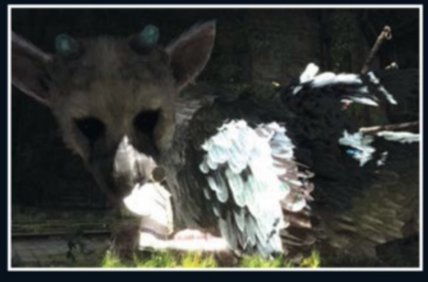


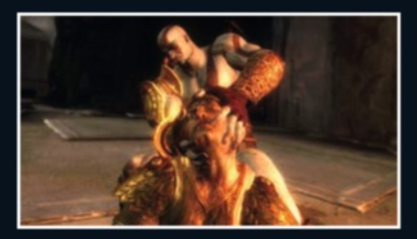
NAUGHTY DOG'S NEXT TITLE

1 This generation, Naughty Dog built itself a reputation as the premier cinematic storyteller in gaming. After turning the PS3's fortunes around with triple-A platform exclusives, it'll be interesting to see if it pushes for new IP on the next gen or continues its PS3 legacy. There was even talk of a *Jak & Daxter* reboot at one point.

THE LAST GUARDIAN

2 Sony's answer to *Half-Life 3*, *The Last Guardian* has supposedly been in development since 2007. The game is still alive, though; currently being re-engineered by a smaller, undisclosed studio – ready to be reintroduced by SCE Japan Studio. We look forward to the re-announcement: it could be *Ico* for the PS4.





MEDIA MOLECULE'S PS4 GAME

3 Media Molecule has confirmed it's working on a PS4 project, which will apparently use some of the tools showcased in its tech demo at the PS4 launch earlier this year. We're expecting to see Move integration, hardware-specific mechanics and numerous user-friendly level-building tools, all presented with Media Molecule's trademark verve and flair.



STUDIO SANTA MONICA'S OPEN WORLD PROJECT

4 The *God Of War* developer has teased its PS4 project in *God Of War: Ascension* – crack a puzzle and you're rewarded with a still image of Earth, captioned "When the Earth stops, the journey begins…"

DAVID CAGE'S NEXT PROJECT

5 Quantic Dream's David Cage has promised his first PS4 offering will pick up (thematically) where *Beyond: Two Souls* and *Heavy Rain* left off, but take the ideas in a very different direction. Apparently the game is still in pre-production, but is in keeping with Quantic Dream's heavy focus on narrative.



» Gara then discusses deals with Ubisoft and Activision, bringing exclusive content for *Watch Dogs* and *Destiny* when they both hit retail in 2014, but also points to the quality of Sony's own in-house studios, particularly those that have yet to announce their projects currently in development for PS4. Naughty Dog, Quantic Dream and Media Molecule are all working on new titles for the platform, whether they turn out to be entirely new IPs or continuations of popular franchises. It's a different tact to Microsoft, who has to date teased and revealed a swathe of high-profile projects due on Xbox One in the future.

"[The studios are] working on a creative process," Gara says. "[They're] putting their baby together, for want of a better term, and there's a right time to reveal what that is. We do tend to announce our titles significantly before they come to market, but you want the confidence that it's coming together as planned. Projects can change course, especially during the early phases. So there's a right time to reveal what it is and the fact that we've decided it's not the right time to give news about what those studios are doing just means it's not the right time."

It's not the first time that two competing consoles have announced retail launches within the same month – Nintendo's GameCube and Microsoft's Xbox launched mere days apart in the US during 2001 – however, it's easily the most fiercely competitive match-up. There has been a growing discontent within the industry that the current generation has dragged on beyond its natural conclusion – despite an influx in both profits and creativity in the last few months – but it's peculiar that with no clearly defined cycle to the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 that both Microsoft and Sony's plans for new hardware would align so closely. "It's interesting. As a company we develop our plans in isolation and you only have a gut feeling or some broad indications of what competitors may do, so we felt it was very important to come out in a timely manner this time without awareness of where the competition may be or any certain awareness," says Gara. "It has turned out to be coincidence, which is amazing."

Sony isn't ignoring other areas of opposition, as smartphones and tablets have flourished in the time since PlayStation 3 launched in 2006, and there have even been several upstarts vying for the coveted spot beneath the television. In the last month alone Valve has announced its intentions to move into the living space with SteamOS – does Sony expect more console competition in the years ahead?

"Who knows?" is Gara's frank response. "If you go back to the PS3 launch I don't think anybody would've suspected that a piece of glass was going to be a competitive device. Our world has evolved in many senses complicated what is a competitor. Any and all of these experiences are competition, so I think it's incredibly important to keep an eye on all these gaming experiences out there for consumers." Gara is also quick to point out that Sony hasn't forgotten about one platform that has seemingly been overlooked by some corners of the industry. "I think it's important that we don't forget about Nintendo – some people do but we don't," he says. "I think it's also important that we keep an eye on our closest competitors, which is Microsoft

PS4 TIMELINE

→ **Warning: a parody**

2013

NOVEMBER 2013
PlayStation 4 launches worldwide with *Killzone: Shadow Fall* and *Knack* as its first-party line-up.

2014

FEBRUARY 2014
Sucker Punch's PS4 debut arrives, showcasing the depth and vast possibilities that a tailored next-gen open world can offer.

APRIL 2014
Sony announces PS4/PS Vita bundle to persuade consumers. After all, two expensive pieces of equipment are better than one.



JULY 2014
After the misuse of the 'Share' button, teabagging videos render YouTube unusable – Sony replaces the button with a sticker of Toro Inoue.

Killzone: Shadow Fall is about as safe an exclusive as you can get, but then that's what a console launch is about, really – wide appeal. The best is yet to come.

today, but we've also got to keep an eye on the mobile and tablet market and I think there are clear signs that we've taken clear note of that environment as we've developed PlayStation 4. Then this Steam environment – is it relevant? Of course it's relevant. So what are we doing to compete against these things? Well, first and foremost we want to re-establish our credentials as owning the top-tier experience in gaming. That doesn't mean there won't be many more experiences out there but it's our job and I think we're doing a good job of re-establishing the highest-level experience you can have in gaming."

Sony is rightfully confident about the launch of PS4 as it more than matches the competition in several areas, some of which have been downplayed by the company – Sony has been modest about the capabilities of its optional PlayStation Camera ("It is an important piece of functionality to have but we always thought it wasn't so core to the experience that we want to require every user to have it," says Gara) – but what of the post-launch strategy? How has Sony future-proofed the console beyond the next year? Gara predicts that, much like the PS3, it'll be some time before the PS4 will truly hit its stride. "Just the pure grunt that it has, the pure firepower that makes this the most powerful console that has ever been launched. That gives us huge confidence," he enthuses. "It won't even break a sweat in the first period. It also gives developers a great opportunity to grow under the demands of it and deliver bigger and better games as they go forward. The architecture is designed to be flexible, adaptable and easy to work with, so more PC-like architecture gives more flexibility in terms of the roadmap of how it evolves. That shows quite promising signs that we can take this journey successfully."

> "It is designed to be flexible, adaptable and easy to work with"



Who knows what this tech demo will end up turning into. Is David Cage doing a comedy?

Gara isn't being evasive; it's just that the future for PlayStation 4 is as much of a surprise to Sony right now as it is for the consumer. We've seen the console experience transform from a gaming device to an all-in-one entertainment hub in the break between PlayStations 3 and 4, and it's certain to radically change between 4 and what we're logically going to presume will be 5. The medium doesn't make an evolutionary leap with the arrival of a new console, but begins a journey. A starting block for developers to test their talent and bolt towards undreamed-of innovation, a race that is as unpredictable as it is exciting.

"That's the great thing about creating a whole new platform, isn't it?" adds Gara as our conversation comes to a close. "That's how I see PlayStation 4 advancing: start good and get better. Not all great ideas will come from first-party studios. Some will I'm sure, but many more will come from other developers. All these new bells and whistles, the bigger engine at the centre… it means one thing: go forth and conquer."

2015

JUNE 2015
E3 2015 brings a swathe of announcements for PS4: *Uncharted 5*, *LittleBigPlanet 3* and *All-Stars Battle Royale 2* are all slated for release within 12 months.

AUGUST 2015
Motion control is taken to a new level with PlayStation Eye 2. It scans facial nuances and translates them onto in-game avatars.



2016

FEBRUARY 2016
Gaikai crashes. Users head to high street retailers only to find barren wastelands.

DECEMBER 2016
PSN accidently leaks *Red Dead Redemption 3*, revealing its ending theme by Ms Dynamite.

2017

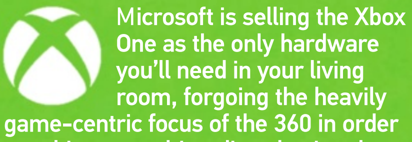
MARCH 2017
After realising the impermanence of the universe, Sony closes all of its major studios aside from Naughty Dog.

JUNE 2017
The studio follows with *Nolan & Troy* – a game where Nolan North and Troy Baker play every character in a feverish nightmare.

CONSOLE LAUNCH: XBOX ONE

The developers behind Xbox One's massive launch line-up weigh in on the advantages of the hardware...

Being able to track more than one person, improved voice controls and a closer range means more people will be able to actually use Kinect 2.0.



Microsoft is selling the Xbox One as the only hardware you'll need in your living room, forgoing the heavily game-centric focus of the 360 in order to achieve a multimedia cohesion that promises to make your life easier. It hasn't been a simple journey for the Xbox One, though – the path travelled to launch has been fraught with bad publicity and policy U-turns. Microsoft remains undeterred, however – defiant in the face of adversity, the company's Xbox One push was galvanised on the run-up to launch, regaining its feet after stumbling out of the starting block. Microsoft is placing a heavy gambit on the One's performance; the lack of backwards compatibility effectively puts all of Microsoft's chips in one hand.

Launching against the PS4, Microsoft needed to assert the Xbox One's unique identity as clearly as possible. After pioneering console connectivity by introducing Xbox Live way back on the original Xbox, Microsoft's focus has always been on retaining that social, connected vibe with their products. The One is no different.

"I'm excited about what we can do with the hardware, but for me it is connectivity that defines Xbox One," states David Braben of Frontier Developments, the developer behind Xbox One launch title *Zoo Tycoon*. "The combination of substantial local storage we can rely upon and the thoroughly integrated network functionality through Xbox Live, combined with cloud services will make for some great games. It means we can take different approaches to games; making them richer and more reactive to the community."

> "I'm excited about what we can do with the hardware, but for me it is connectivity that defines Xbox One"

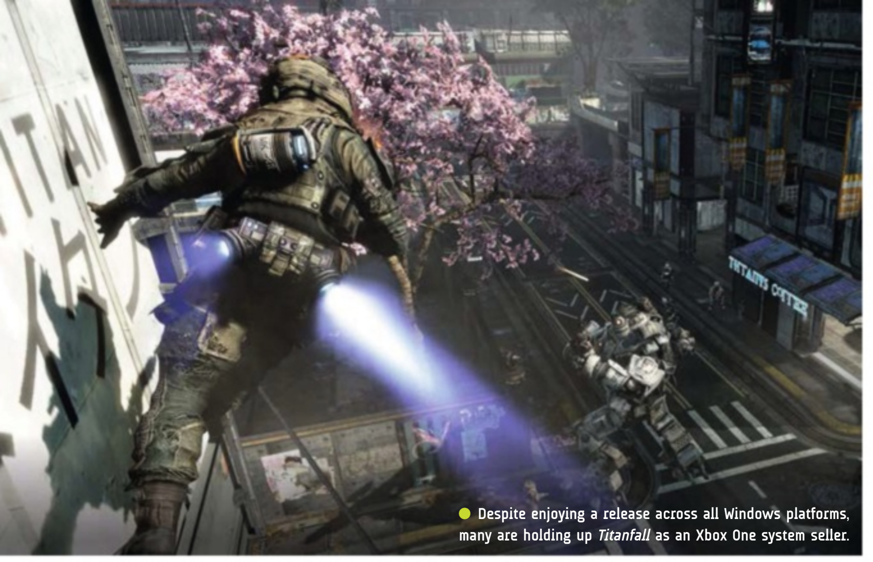
Offering Xbox Live as a paid facility has meant that Microsoft has had to deliver an effective service to customers; while PSN could afford frequent downtime because it was offered for free, Xbox Live has never had that luxury. With the Xbox One, Microsoft is revising the Live experience to assure it's robust and ready for the strain a next-gen console will put on the service. The archaic five-star reputation system is receiving an update that locks repeat offenders with bad rep out of playing with other players, containing them in lobbies with other trolls. Your digital games library will be available from every console that you import your Gamertag to. Matchmaking will run in the background while you're doing something else, setting you up with the perfect opponent when you jump back into a game. Gold membership is now only required for one account per console. You can now have over 1,000 friends, and it works offline too.

It's a credit to Microsoft that Live has been such a consistently performing online platform, and it's clear that the Xbox One is another vessel through which Microsoft intends to deliver that sense of consistent community – that feeling of being part of an always-there cyber village. The revisions the company has made to its initial policies post-announcement prove that, despite popular belief, Microsoft is listening. To customers *and* developers.

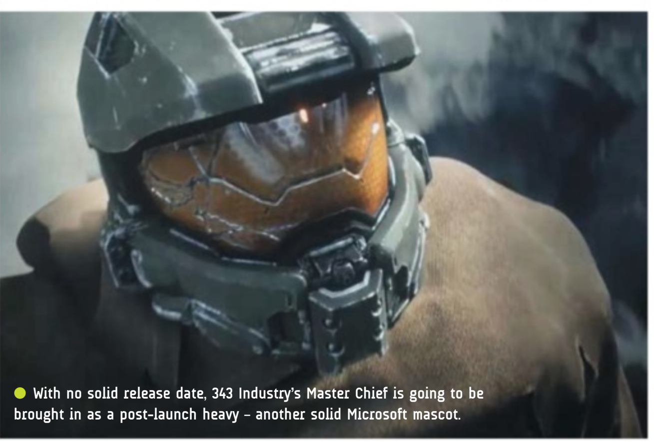
"The relationship working with Microsoft has been fantastic," states Jason Leigh, senior producer at Capcom Vancouver, talking about *Dead Rising 3*. "We jumped at the chance to work on a next-gen version of *Dead Rising*. Being Xbox One exclusive has allowed us to focus all of our development efforts on the strength of the console, and it's been a huge bonus to develop a great creative partnership with the team at Microsoft. They have been incredibly supportive and given us the freedom to make the best game possible, while pushing us to exploit the strengths of the hardware." »

Our favourite thing about the Xbox One pad is the haptic feedback in the triggers – especially when it teaches you how much pressure to apply in *Forza*.

Kinect will be able to tell who's holding what pad, and will switch on-screen data accordingly. It'll make party play much more streamlined.


Despite enjoying a release across all Windows platforms, many are holding up *Titanfall* as an Xbox One system seller.


Microsoft is appealing to a broad audience with games like *Zoo Tycoon* and *Powerstar Golf* – the casual gamer won't feel left out at launch.


With no solid release date, 343 Industry's Master Chief is going to be brought in as a post-launch heavy – another solid Microsoft mascot.


If this is what the CryEngine can achieve on Xbox One, we're excited to see what Unreal, Frostbite and Square Enix's Luminous engine can do.

This enthusiasm for Microsoft's developer relationship is echoed elsewhere, too – with Michael Willette, lead designer of *Killer Instinct*, saying "[Working with Microsoft] has been very rewarding. We have been able to reinvigorate a franchise with like-minded individuals. Our goal has been to make an outstanding fighting game and Microsoft has been supportive in every step of the process. They also encouraged us to think outside of the normal paradigms for fighters."

It's clear, then, that Microsoft is giving developers the tools to instil their games with an indefinite life – rather than ship a boxed title and have it live as long as its shelf-life dictates, the Xbox One will let developers tweak their titles depending on how the online community reacts. This sense of dynamism has a stunning amount of potential, and it's refreshing to see Microsoft gearing its console toward taking advantage of these prospects, working in tandem with developers to lay the foundations for games that can be actively improved upon after launch.

Dan Greenawalt of Turn 10 – the developer behind *Forza 5* – was keen to attest it was the "limitless potential" of the Xbox One that captured his creative attention. "We are sort of leading the way with things like cloud computing through features like Drivatar," he claimed, "but, really, that's just the start of where talented developers from all over the world will push this technology in the future."

> "We are sort of leading the way with things like cloud computing through features like Drivatar"

After the difficult period between announcement and launch, Microsoft is willing to prove to consumers that its multimedia-hub/console is worth its high asking price. With full Kinect integration, TV streaming and camera-friendly services (most notably: Skype), the Xbox One certainly seems like it can deliver as a the only box you'll need in your living room. Kinect has had an upgrade: it can identify who's holding the controller at any time, and accommodate that in-game (by adjusting scores, etc); it will recognise you and sign you in, even on a friend's console; it will respond to most of your regular speech, à la Siri, and it'll work in smaller spaces than the original.

Yukio Futatsugi of *Crimson Dragon* was particularly fond of Microsoft's decision to ship every Xbox One console with Kinect, saying "Releasing a game whose core gameplay feature is based on a new input device that users may or may not have is a pretty difficult process. But including the Kinect in every box relieves that pressure and makes everything much easier for development and developers." Microsoft is seemingly making everything as easy as possible for developers to create the games they want to make – Josh Bridge, executive producer for Capcom Vancouver explains how Kinect 2.0 has allowed the *Dead Rising* franchise to evolve further: "Having a challenge like working Kinect into a fast paced gameplay experience points to evolution and actually gets me excited about what the hardware can offer for new


With an HDMI In slot on the back, you can even plug your 360 into your Xbox One and play your old console through your new one if you ever get a nostalgia itch.

XBOX ONE'S FIRST STAGE

Microsoft has managed to secure a varied range of exclusive launch titles for the Xbox One, making the first stage of the console's life a very promising landscape



FORZA MOTORSPORT 5 Turn 10

Achieving mechanical and graphical feats that were impossible on the 360, the Xbox's flagship racing sim proves how far the One's visual capabilities can go.



DEAD RISING 3 Capcom Vancouver

With a darker aesthetic than its predecessors, and forgoing the time limited restrictions the series is known for, players have as long as they want to explore the huge open world.



RYSE: SON OF ROME Crytek

Playing through Ancient Rome as Marius Titus, *Ryse* is the Xbox One's first hack-'n'-slash, reminding us of last-gen's *Viking: Battle For Asgard*.



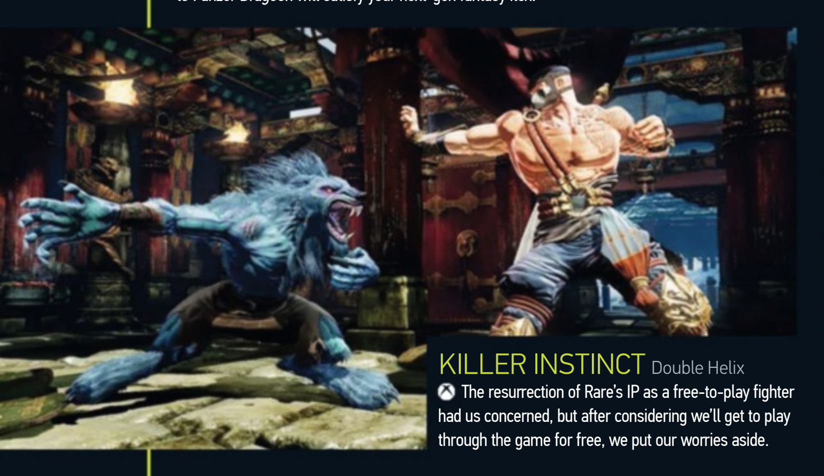
CRIMSON DRAGON Grounding, Inc.

An on-rails Kinect shooter that also uses traditional pad-based play, the spiritual successor to *Panzer Dragoon* will satisfy your next-gen fantasy itch.



THE FIGHTER WITHIN Daoka

The Kinect-only beat-em-up takes off where *Fighters Uncaged* left off, making the most out of the improved Kinect 2.0 – perhaps proving that the hardware isn't just a gimmick after all.



KILLER INSTINCT Double Helix

The resurrection of Rare's IP as a free-to-play fighter had us concerned, but after considering we'll get to play through the game for free, we put our worries aside.



ZOO TYCOON Frontier Developments

Some may see a top-down management sim as a strange inclusion to the launch titles, but *Zoo Tycoon*'s presence indicates Microsoft's focus on making the console appeal to all tastes.

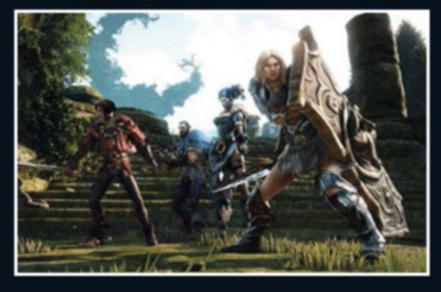
5 EXCLUSIVES THAT WILL DEFINE XBOX ONE



HALO 5

1 Little is known about 343 Industry's *Halo 5*, aside from that it's a continuation of the Reclaimer mythos that *Halo 4* started. *Halo* has long been the flagship title for Microsoft consoles, and we're certain that Halo 5 will be the backbone of the Xbox One's first-year exclusive line-up – probably as the definitive Xbox One multiplayer experience.

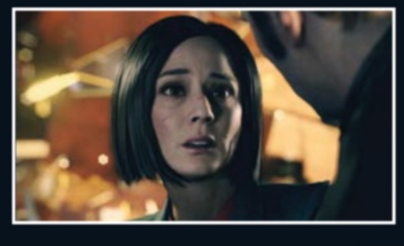
FABLE LEGENDS



2 A multiplayer-focused title set in the *Fable* universe, *Legends* promises to bring a unique experience to the Xbox One with its SmartGlass integration and 4-on-1 gameplay design. Making one player character an active antagonist sounds inventive; it's clear Molyneux's departure from Lionhead hasn't dampened the studio's creative energy.

BLACK TUSK STUDIOS' MYSTERIOUS PROJECT

3 Microsoft Studios' head, Phil Spencer, tweeted a vague but illuminating piece of information claiming Black Tusk were working with MS Research; a project with "interesting gameplay mechanics" that "looked great". Black Tusk's vacancies page also asks "Do you want to help define Microsoft's next big entertainment franchise?" Watch this space, this could be the next *Halo*.



QUANTUM BREAK

4 Set to run alongside a TV series, *Quantum Break* is Remedy Entertainment's latest, set around the premise of looking forward in time to inform choices you make in the present. This isn't just some lazy time-travel cash-in; Remedy are talking to scientists from CERN to make sure the narrative is grounded in theoretical physics.

GEARS OF WAR 4



5 After *Gears of War: Judgment* failed to satiate fans of the core series, you'd expect Microsoft to capitalise on the open gap in the market by re-introducing the seminal cover-based shooter for next-gen consoles. Returning with a numbered entry in the franchise could work wonders for Microsoft, especially if it got Epic back on board.

» experiences that core gamers will appreciate. The increased accuracy and robustness of the Kinect has allowed us to not have traditional quicktime events in our [game]. As developers, we see the need to have critical challenge points in the experience to change up your flow/pacing. Having Kinect allow you to intuitively escape the clutches of a zombie with a simple 'push' of the controller that you are holding is exactly that; evolution."

Microsoft isn't stopping its added-value campaign with the console's integrated features, though; early adopters of the console are gifted a free copy of *FIFA 2014* – a smart move, and one that's certain to appeal to the UK's games market, even though it's still cheaper to get a PS4 with the game. Microsoft's favourable relationship with EA also extends to Respawn Entertainment's *Titanfall*. The game is a Microsoft exclusive (making appearances across the 360 and PC, too) and is widely touted as a system-seller, taking its shooter cues from *Call Of Duty*, with mechanical and aesthetic influences reminiscent of *Halo* – two of the Xbox 360's most successful franchises.

To offer such diversity of exclusive games at launch is no mean feat, and Microsoft has identified exactly what the heavy-hitting genres are; almost all tastes are catered for – between *Forza 5*'s racing, *Killer Instinct*'s fighting, *Ryse*'s action-adventuring, *Dead Rising 3*'s open world and *Crimson Dragon*'s on-rails shooting, Microsoft's exclusives hit key targets and appeal to the widest common denominator.

But it isn't just quantity that Microsoft is gunning for with its next-gen launch. "This is actually the first time we have shipped a *Forza Motorsport* title at the launch of a new Xbox console," explains Dan Greenawalt. "One of the primary benefits of being first-party is the fantastic access to the Xbox platform team. In the case of Xbox One, we began working with the platform team four years ago, when we were still developing *Forza Motorsport 4*. Being first-party means that we have a responsibility to work as evangelists for the technology and to create features that are designed to drive the new Xbox platforms." Microsoft is clearly relying on its creative teams to prove what their machine is capable of, Greenawalt explains further, "We're pushing the envelope of innovation across every aspect of the game, from the cutting-edge visuals thanks to a brand new graphics engine to new features like Drivatar that have the potential to really change the way people think about traditional artificial intelligence."

Microsoft is attempting to convince consumers and shareholders that the console has vast potential and a lifespan well worth the initial £429 investment. With games like *GTA V* showing off what current-gen hardware can still do, though, and with titles still to come (*Dark Souls II*, *Lightning Returns: Final Fantasy XIII* and *Fable: Anniversary*, among others), many are left wondering if the Xbox One is worth picking up at launch. "Console launches are challenging and exciting times. New hardware presents new ways of bringing ideas to life, or expanding upon previous ones," explains Michael Willette. "We've been able to craft a gorgeous fighter that runs silky smooth at 60fps with tons of visual effects, physics, and dynamic music. A lot of what we are doing we couldn't have pulled off on last-gen hardware."

XBOX ONE TIMELINE



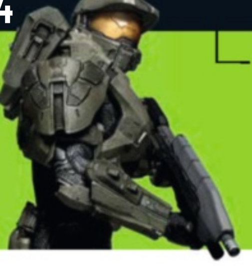
→ Warning: a parody

2013

NOVEMBER 2013 The Xbox One is launched, and Microsoft 'tours' the console around Europe, showing off its stellar launch line-up and improved Kinect.

2014

FEBRUARY 2014 *Fable: Legends* is released. Peter Molyneux goes on record as saying "it's the best game I've ever played."



JUNE 2014 At Microsoft's E3 conference, Phil Harrison shows off his *Red Dead Redemption 2* tattoo as Xbox bargains for exclusivity.

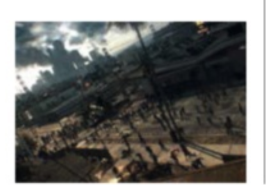
NOVEMBER 2014 *Halo 5* is released, and a record number of sick days are taken across America, costing $20,000,000.

Fable Legends looks like it'll be a great first-party game – we're particularly excited about the ability to play as a villain through SmartGlass connectivity.

David Braben agrees. "There is always a frisson of excitement working with something new, especially a new console, and this is no different. Microsoft has always been a supportive, and rightly very demanding partner to work with. It is great to be running at 1080p on Xbox One without breaking a sweat, even with the richly detailed, beautiful animals and huge zoos of *Zoo Tycoon*." It's clear that developers are keen to take full advantage of the graphical fidelity offered by the Xbox One's hardware then, but the console is more than just a blank canvas upon which beautiful images can be painted – there's a serious amount of processing power under the box's black hood.

"A great example is the physics implementation in *Forza Motorsport 5*," Greenawalt told us. "As a racing sim, we've always taken car dynamics seriously. For *Forza Motorsport 5*, we've been able to push forward into daring new territory, thanks to the immense power of the Xbox One, and a new approach to physics that has really paid dividends. We're now modelling a range of different suspension architectures in the game with a kinematic animation system that wasn't really possible to achieve on the Xbox 360. That, alongside a new approach to tyre modelling, allows us to give a greater level of fidelity to car handling. For the player, it results in a better 'feel' than ever before – even similar performing cars will feel different based on their suspension type and the way their tyres interact with the road."

> "Microsoft has always been a supportive and rightly very demanding partner"



Jason Leigh stated also that the processing power available with the Xbox One allowed Capcom Vancouver to make the game-playing experience feel more complete; "The Xbox One hardware has allowed us to evolve the core experience of the franchise in ways that were simply not possible before. The number of zombies that we can put onscreen now is staggering. We have far more weapons and vehicles than ever before. And even with all of those additions, we are now able to maintain the gameplay density that the franchise is known for and layer it into a fully streaming open world that it several times larger than [*Dead Rising 1* and *2*] combined. It's an amazing experience to drive from one end of the city to the other, through hordes of zombies, and never encounter a load. With the power of the machine at our disposal, it's exciting to think about ways to build upon the core experience and improve it for the future".

While many may have chosen the PS4 as their launch console, Microsoft is aware that this generation's war for console supremacy is a long campaign, and it's been relatively savvy – albeit in more recent months – in setting up a solid base from which to build. With no fewer than 20 platform exclusives coming its way, and with a strong online/cloud-based architecture supporting it behind the scenes, the Xbox One is still a worthy contender, and certainly one for its multiplayer-loving, always-connected fans.

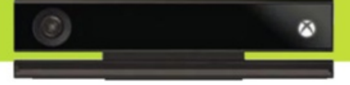
2015 **2016** **2017**

MARCH 2015
Mass Effect once again becomes a Microsoft exclusive, but the entire game is played with Kinect. Tabloids rage at the 'too hands-on' sex scenes.



JUNE 2015
To make *Halo* more accessible, Microsoft announces *Halo Karting*. John-117's massive head in a kart-sized 'hog becomes a new mascot.

APRIL 2016
In an attempt to show off Kinect, Rare releases a game just for dogs – it can identify different breeds and recognises each individual bark.



AUGUST 2016
Xbox Ones across the globe form a shared network and become self-aware, using vocal data stored in their hard-drives to replicate their owners…

JANUARY 2017
Microsoft changes its name to Skynet.



"In addition to infusing the multiplayer experience with cinematic flavour, we've been rethinking fundamental combat and movement in the genre"
VINCE ZAMPELLA RESPAWN ENTERTAINMENT

The futuristic, alien setting means that *Titanfall*'s maps could potentially cover a wide range of environments, from the metropolitan Angel City to maps with more open space or more plant life and other greenery.



Titanfall

CONCEPT ■ Respawn's debut title, with which the team of ex-*Call Of Duty* developers wants to prove that you don't need single-player to make a great game.

Man vs machine: a fairer fight than you might think

INFORMATION

Details

Format:
PC, Xbox One, Xbox 360
Origin:
US
Publisher:
Electronic Arts
Developer:
Respawn Entertainment
Release:
Spring 2014
Players:
1-64

Developer Profile

Respawn co-founder Vince Zampella has a long history with first-person shooters. He and fellow co-founder Jason West, who retired earlier this year, also co-founded Infinity Ward back in 2002. When the pair left Infinity Ward, they took dozens of employees with them, most of whom joined them to form Respawn.

Developer History

Call Of Duty
2003 [PC, Mac]
Call Of Duty 2
2005 [PC, Mac, 360]
Call Of Duty 4: Modern Warfare
2007 [PC, Mac, PS3, 360, Wii]
Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare 2
2009 [PC, PS3, 360]

High Point

Respawn has already received heaps of awards for its debut title. At E3's Game Critics Awards, the game won Best of Show, Best Original Game, Best Online Multiplayer, and more.

***Titanfall* is getting a lot of attention, as is obvious from the huge queues that form at every event at which it has made an appearance.** And that buzz is particularly impressive given how little we really know about this new IP. Developer Respawn Entertainment may have confirmed that the first-person shooter won't have a traditional single-player campaign, ostensibly because not enough players finish them to make one worthwhile, but we don't know what format the game will take instead. We know that at least part of that is a "campaign multiplayer", but we don't know how it'll all fit together, or whether the game will have anything to offer those who aren't always online.

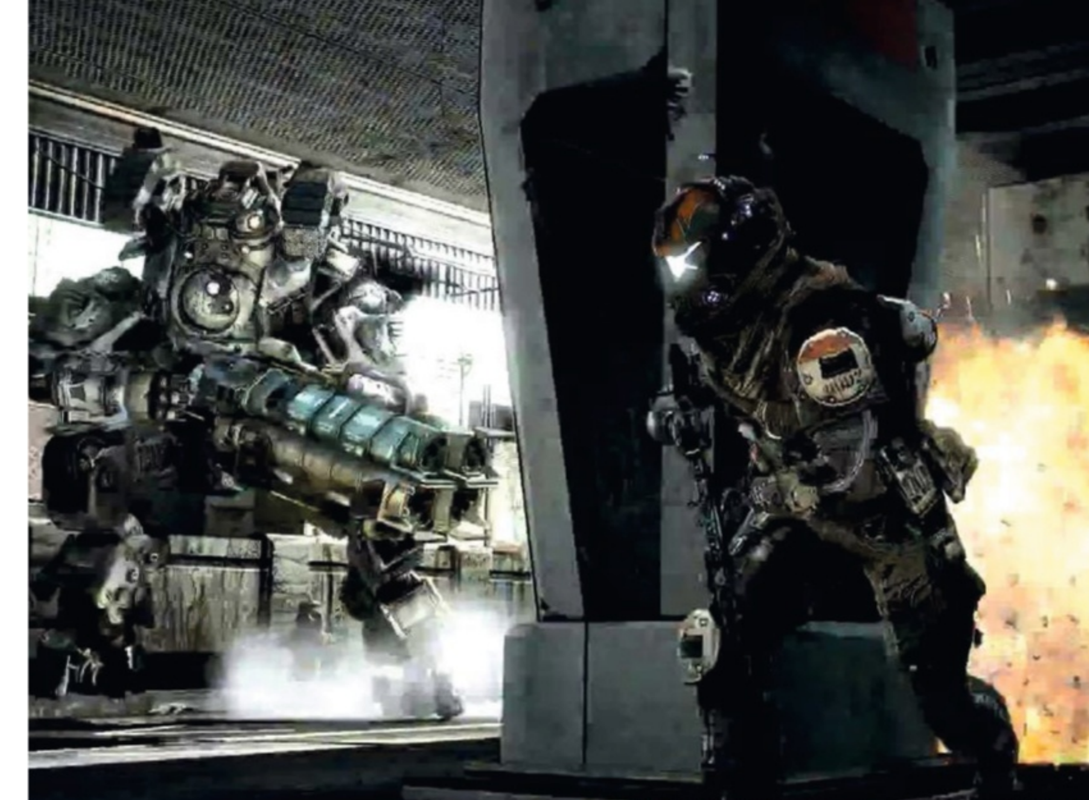
What Respawn has been keen to emphasise is that this campaign multiplayer will feature some of what would normally appear in the single-player, which will differentiate it from the online multiplayer modes of other modern shooters. Attrition Mode, for example, has the same essential rules as a standard team deathmatch, but when you load it up the differences are immediately clear. Matches become more like story-driven missions, with a brief that includes plot details, NPCs that keep you informed of unfolding events, and AI characters that get involved in the action. Your match/mission ends with an Epilogue that completely changes the goal for each team: the losing team has to get to an evacuation point before the timer runs out, and the winning team has the pleasure of taking out as many of the retreating side as possible. Hopefully this kind of change in pace will appear in modes we haven't seen yet too.

/// Given that the only other mode we have seen so far is a capture-the-flag-style affair called Hardpoint, you would be forgiven for expecting *Titanfall* to play much like current popular modern shooters, albeit with a sprinkling of flavour provided by these single-player-style features. But with this next-gen debut, Respawn is aiming for innovation. Those who don't play a lot of first-person shooters may glance at *Titanfall* and think it looks familiar, but those with experience with the genre will know that a couple of new key features can make all the difference.

For *Titanfall*, the first of these is jetpacks, which are a natural fit thanks to the futuristic setting. All Pilots – the super-soldiers of this world – have them, and while it doesn't look like they ever enable real flight, they do significantly expand the wearer's range of movement. Notably, jetpacks let Pilots double-jump and run up walls, which makes combat feel fast and fluid, especially when you go back and play another modern shooter to compare. Instead of squatting behind cover and peeking out of doorways, you can run and jump your way up a tower for a useful vantage point or escape a dead end by leaping to the second storey of a nearby building. In one map, called Angel City, you can use the jetpack to head from one end to the other without once bothering to come down to ground level.

The more obvious game-changing feature is the Titans. Again, appearances may deceive someone who hasn't had the chance to play the game for themselves. At a quick glance you might see sluggish giant robots, but these are customisable mechs portrayed as extensions of their Pilots. When you, as a Pilot, run up to your personal Titan, it reaches down a humanoid arm to pull you into the cockpit, and after that brief animation you're left with a familiar first-person shooter view. The Titans might not be as graceful as the wall-running Pilots, but their movement feels much more natural than you might expect. Controlling them feels a lot like controlling your Pilot: they can look around, they can run, and they carry a deadly weapon at all times.

Naturally, play gravitates towards the Titans. Everyone starts as a Pilot, and you have to wait for a timer to count down before an NPC informs you that your Titan is ready, and all you have to do is press a button to summon it. This is the eponymous Titanfall, the moment at which your metal machine comes crashing down from the dropship hovering above, its impact sending dust in all directions. Once there's a Titan in play, enemy Pilots will almost



certainly seek it out. For one thing, the bigger dot on your map represents a bigger points prize if you manage to wipe that mech out. And especially at this early stage when it's still all new, it's just a lot of fun to watch the Titans stomping around. As long as you don't get caught underfoot.

Those who haven't yet tried the game will likely worry about balance. After all, the Titans are substantially larger than the Pilots and can kill them as easily by stepping on them as by shooting them. It's hard to predict whether players will begin to heavily favour the mechs when the game comes out early next year, but with what we've seen so far it feels like Respawn has put a lot of effort into making both Pilots and Titans viable avatars. Given that the play between the two is part of what makes *Titanfall* so different from its contemporaries, it's bound to be a primary focus for the development team to get that balance right.

One way in which the game encourages players to switch between Pilots and Titans is with the maps. Hopefully, the fact that it apparently takes place in the future and on a planet other than Earth will ensure that *Titanfall* has a variety of settings, from the urban environments like Angel City to spaces with more greenery to really show off the graphical prowess of the Xbox One. And while Titans might have the advantage in those wide open spaces, they won't be able to run in and out of any normal-sized buildings.

/// Pilots have more to offer than just their ability to fit into tight spaces, however. Their standard weapons suffice for wiping out other Pilots, but they also have a third weapon slot that's reserved for anti-Titan armament. Your Pilot could run and jump its way up a building and take out an enemy Titan from afar with an Archer Guided Anti-Titan Rocket Launcher, or run in and let off a powerful shot from the Magnetic Grenade Launcher, relying on the gun's technology to guide the missile home. Even without the added bonus of the extra points you will net for taking out a Titan over an enemy Pilot, it feels great to watch one explode into so much scrap and know that it was your doing.

Even battle between two Titans is more interesting than the kind of warfare you find in other modern shooters. Sure, you could use your Titan's mobility to dart around pelting the enemy with a rocket launcher that shoots four at once, but you could also run in close and pull that Titan's Pilot from its innards, throwing them to the ground. Or you could combine the power of your Titan with the finesse of your Pilot, running your Titan in close before ejecting your Pilot, aiming to land on the back of the other Titan where you can rip open a panel and shoot out its mechanical parts – all the while hoping that a sniper somewhere doesn't pick you out of the air.

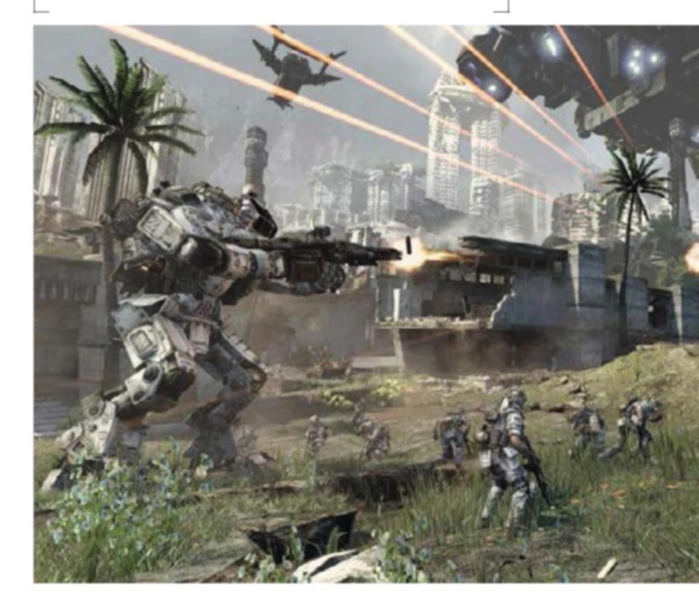
With these new ways to play, even those who have clocked hundreds of hours on other modern shooters will have plenty of new skills to learn. You'll have to teach yourself to pay attention to multiple levels, while keeping an eye out for Pilots scaling buildings around you or ejecting from their Titans to fly through the air. You'll need to decide when to avoid Titans and when to run in close, avoiding heavy footfall and the possibility that one will release Electric Smoke that obscures your vision.

You will want to familiarise yourself with *Titanfall*'s futuristic weapons, like a Pilot's Smart Pistol that can shoot around corners or a Titan's Vortex Blocker that can catch bullets and return them to their sender. Add to that the way that the game shifts in nature even within a single mode – the difference between the early moments in which you can only be a Pilot, the bulk in which Titans have been summoned into play, and that Epilogue sequence that gives you a new goal to work for – and you've got a game that should take a long time to get boring.

Titanfall seems set to prove that big-budget first-person shooters don't have to be restricted to the kinds of games that dominate the genre now. Without drastically changing the formula, its few new features pave the way for more tactical ways to play and significantly change the feel of combat. Even if the story is by necessity a typical wartime tale (although the presence of female Pilots alone sets it apart from many of its contemporaries), the new style of play should bring some much-needed refreshment to the landscape of multiplayer shooters.



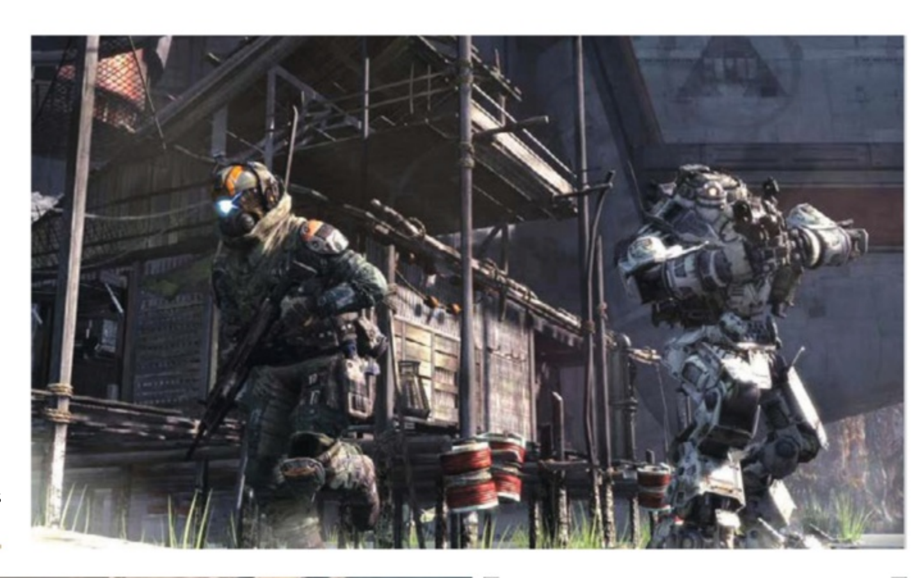
Above: We're not sure how much depth there is to the lore of *Titanfall* beyond big robots killing small men, which we're absolutely fine with.





TREMENDOUS TITANS

LIKE PILOTS, TITANS will be customisable. Each has a main weapon, a fallback like cluster rockets or frag grenades, and an ability. We've seen three combinations so far: the Battle Rifle Titan has, naturally, an XO-16 Battle Rifle. Its ability is the Vortex Blocker, a small magnetic field that catches incoming projectiles and sends them back to whence they came. The Heavy Weapons Titan has a 40mm cannon that shoots explosive rounds. Its ability is Electric Smoke, which can obscure its movements and confuse Pilots who stray too close. The High Explosives Titan has a rocket launcher that shoots four rockets at a time. It also has Electric Smoke, which makes you wonder what other abilities will be in the final game.





Above: *Titanfall* might be multiplayer only, but it still has cinematic plot moments to carry whatever story Respawn wants to tell.
Left: The anti-campaign structure of the game is something we're certainly curious about – Infinity Ward is good at scripted setpieces and pacing.



"It's an exciting time in the industry and it feels like the perfect time to be unveiling Titanfall"
VINCE ZAMPELLA RESPAWN ENTERTAINMENT

POWERFUL PILOTS

WHEN *TITANFALL* COMES out, players will be able to customise their Pilot's loadout and even change it in the middle of a match. But so far, Respawn has only shown us three prebuilt Pilots: The Assault Pilot has a loadout that should feel familiar to FPS fans. Its two standard weapons are a B3 Wingman Revolver and a medium-range assault rifle, and its anti-Titan weapon is a rapid-fire Sidewinder. The Tactical Pilot has that Smart Pistol that can lock onto multiple targets, as well as the B3 Wingman Revolver. Its anti-Titan weapon is the Magnetic Grenade Launcher. The CQB (Close Quarters Battle) Pilot has a semi-automatic shotgun, the B3 Wingman, and the Archer Guided Anti-Titan Rocket Launcher.

Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain

CONCEPT ■ The seminal tactical espionage game goes open world, giving players unparalleled freedom to stalk, snipe and spy on their enemies.

Kept you waiting, huh?

Some people consider Hideo Kojima a visionary – a man with a crystal clear image of the games he wants to create and the reaction he wants to provoke with them. Others consider him a publicity mogul – fluent in hyperbole and false promises. Either way, Kojima was responsible for one of the biggest titles this generation with *Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns Of The Patriots*, and his FOX Engine-based next-gen projects are looking just as promising.

We say projects (plural) because *Metal Gear Solid V* is a fusion of two projects, offered up as one complete title – *Metal Gear Solid: Ground Zeroes* and *The Phantom Pain*. *Ground Zeroes* was a originally a tech demo designed to show off the FOX Engine, whilst *The Phantom Pain* itself was nothing more than a trailer until Kojima announced the two projects were going to ship as a combined title. In-game, this duality will materialise as *Ground Zeroes* serving as the prologue to the main narrative – though the true nature of both, we're told by Konami, will be revealed in early December.

Adding a little more depth to the complex chronology of the *Metal Gear* series, *The Phantom Pain* will be a direct sequel to the PSP's *Peace Walker* – the first *Metal Gear* game to adopt the 'tactical espionage operations' moniker. Like its predecessor, *The Phantom Pain* will allow players to build bases from which they can operate, providing a convenient central hub for equipping items and weapons. The expansion of this feature makes a lot of sense when you consider *The Phantom Pain*'s biggest innovation to the *Metal Gear* series: it's set in a true open world.

Illuminated with a photorealistic lighting engine, the scale of *Metal Gear Solid V*'s world looks like it dwarfs everything we've seen in the series so far – so much so that a variety of vehicles have been implemented in the game to allow Snake easier navigation of the game world. From horses to helicopters, the newly code-named Punished Snake will have complete freedom in his over-world manoeuvres – even the mission structure is open: Kojima asserts that there will be certain objectives that run through the game, but that players will decide when, how and where Snake will achieve these goals. It's touted as a true open-world game, but we've got out reservations – stealth games work better when the player is funnelled into claustrophobic levels where the threat of detection is tangible; where tension is as much as a game mechanic as the control scheme or AI.

Our doubts are offset somewhat by the problems Kojima had when planning the Tokyo Game Show stage show at this year's Japanese conference, though. He claimed it was difficult to script the demo he was planning for the event because the AI was too complex and unpredictable – that every practice run he did proffered different results. This gives us hope for the open-world formula of the game: if the AI operates on contextual algorithms rather than scripted patterns, then their responses to the player should be much more involving and dynamic than we typically see in open-world games.

> "Kojima claimed it was difficult to script the demo he was planning for Tokyo Game Show because the AI was too complex and unpredictable"

The game mechanics of the *Metal Gear* franchise have had to be altered to accommodate Snake's open-world adventures, too. It looks like *The Phantom Pain* will be the first instalment of the series to feature regenerating health – in the gameplay we've seen, there's no life gauge on the HUD. There are also markers over enemies' heads – a gameplay element carried over from *Peace Walker* – and Snake has the ability to scope out enemies' outlines through structures. This all makes sense within the gameplay context of an open-world, but it feels like it dilutes the hardcore angle the *Metal Gear* series has always taken within the stealth genre – like a distinct Westernisation of the series; more *Splinter Cell* than *Metal Gear*.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox One, PlayStation 4, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Konami
Developer: Kojima Productions
Release: TBA 2014
Genre: Action-Adventure
Players: 1

Developer Profile

A Konami subsidiary, Kojima Productions is a studio consisting of over 200 staff, which was initially set up to relieve Hideo Kojima of the admin duties he was subject to at Konami proper. Under Kojima Productions, the visionary developer is allowed more of a focus on creating the games he wants to play.

Developer History

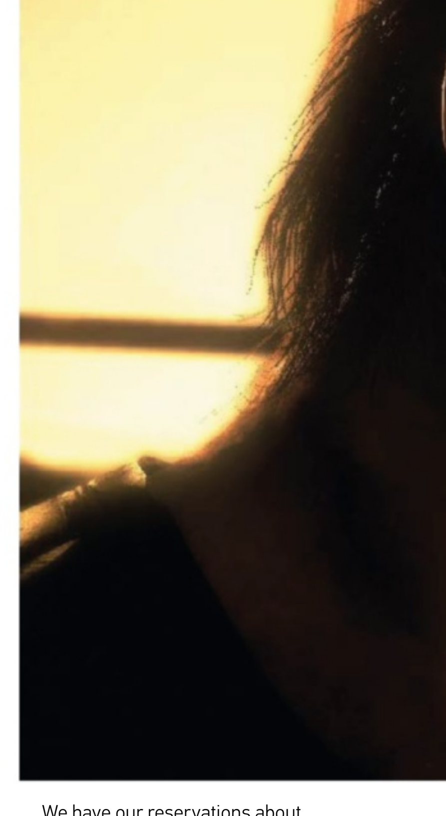
Castlevania: Lords of Shadow
2010 [PS3, Xbox 360]

Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots
2008 [PS3]

Lunar Knights
2007 [DS]

High Point

Metal Gear Solid 4 received near-perfect reviews and was a resounding commercial success. Fusing a soaring score, amazing technical achievements and a typically intrusive narrative, it's no wonder *MGS4* is considered many gamer's favourite PS3 exclusive.



We have our reservations about how well an open-world stealth game will work, but Kojima seems incredibly confident about *Metal Gear Solid V*. It's a game rich with difficult thematic subjects – torture, child soldiers, blackmail, civilian execution – but we think the tone Kojima Productions is going for will be able to carry the weight of these themes with ease: there is more depth to Kojima's creativity than just publicity generation.



■ Above: The game runs on a 24-hour clock, with 'a realistic passage of time'. It looks like smoking will make time pass quicker, too.

Above: *The Phantom Pain* and/or *Ground Zeroes* will build on the established character dynamics created in *Peace Walker*. Probably a good time to pick up that *HD Collection*, we'd wager. Below: A mistranslation from Kojima's Japanese Twitter feed to his English account stated he wanted the games to take on a more 'erotic' aesthetic. Despite taking back the use of the word, some of the character designs arguably live up to the connotations.

■ Above: We hope for a *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*-level of scale and detail in the world of *Thief*, pleasing hub worlds with real character.



■ Above: This Douglas-from-*The-IT-Crowd* lookalike is called Bosso, and he's the closest thing Garrett's got to a friend.

Thief

CONCEPT ■ The enigmatic Garrett returns to pilfer his way through a city sliding into the depths of corruption

Release your inner kleptomaniac

One of *Deus Ex*'s most enduring achievements was its approach to reimagining the franchise, and creating the sympathetic Adam Jensen to slot neatly into a world obsessed with transhumanism and synthetic evolution. Strip back the flesh of that speculative world, and you're left with the bones of something altogether more impressive – a game that understood player choice and linked character development with agency and mechanics.

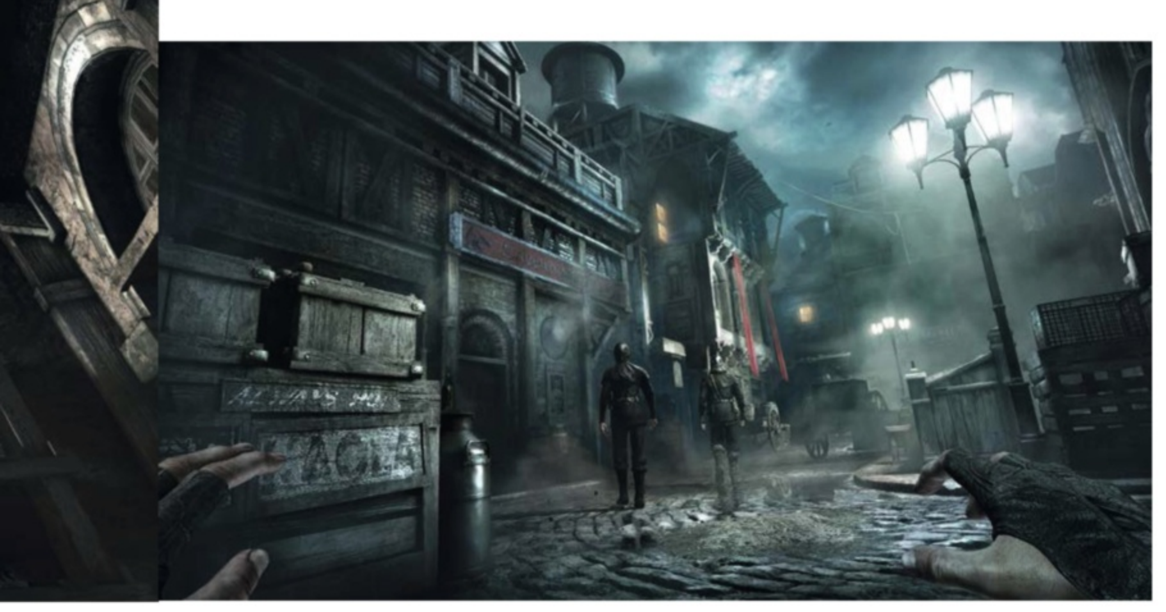
We got our hands on *Thief* recently, and one of the most striking things we noticed was how Eidos Montreal has managed to retain the idea of keeping the player in the head of their in-game avatar, by subtly introducing mechanics to *make* them play the way the character would. Garrett – recognisable protagonist to anyone familiar with the *Thief* IP – is a master thief, fittingly enough, and his skillset lies in pilfering and subterfuge. Get into a fight, and you'll be punished. Brutally.

"Being a warrior is not Garrett's top skill," explains Joe Khoury, producer of the game, "that's not how he does things, even in the first *Thief*. He can eliminate one threat if he needs to, maybe two, but he has to be strategic." Playing as Garrett, you realise that stalking the dark streets of your medieval city is dangerous, especially since you're a wanted man whose posters are plastered on every available notice board. A member of the local watch so much as spotting you lurking about means trouble.

"Garrett's most ideal situation is to get in, get out quickly, without anyone ever knowing he was there," continues Khoury, "he can't go in all guns blazing – these guards are militarily trained and strategic." This shows – instigate confrontation with a guard and the only weapon you have to defend yourself is a cudgel with minimal range. If more than two enemies close in on you, you'll almost certainly die. The game forces a stealthy playstyle on you – forces you to fill Garrett's shoes. Where *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* gave you the opportunity to stealth it through the game, or be a complete desperado, or even a complete pacifist, Eidos Montreal's newest title forces you to think, act and play like the eponymous master *Thief*.

> "Garrett's ultimate objective is that prized piece of loot – that gold, that crown, whatever – that is his objective. Not killing, not death"
>
> JOE KHOURY EIDOS MONTREAL

"I think it's important that if you're making a game where you want a player to feel a certain thing that they must feel the *strength* of a character," asserts Khoury. "It defines



WE BUILT THIS CITY...

THE IMPOSING gothic scenery of *Thief* is as gloomy and intense as you'd expect from a stealth game, with claustrophobic streets working on a variety of levels – from gutters and basement tracts to the rafters and roofs of tightly packed buildings. It's all a bit close – almost chokingly so. "That's the kind of intimidation we wanted to design with our architecture; we want the player to feel that they're in a situation where something is not right," Khoury tells us, "There's a break between the classes in society, and taking that into context, we wanted to develop spaces that the player could roam around in and explore. Interesting architecture, interesting interior design – all that came into play when we established the artist direction of this game."

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox 360, PS3, Xbox One, PS4, PC
Origin: Canada
Publisher: Square Enix
Developer: Eidos Montreal
Release: February 2014
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Eidos Montreal debuted with *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* in 2011, and has proved to the world that it is capable of restoring dormant IP to its former splendour. Having developed the online facet of the recent *Tomb Raider* reboot, Eidos Montreal has proved its stripes with both single and multiplayer content.

Developer History

Deus Ex: Human Revolution **2011 [PS3, Wii U, Xbox 360, Mac, PC]**
Tomb Raider (Multiplayer) **2013 [PS3, Xbox 360, PC]**
Deus Ex: The Fall **2013 [Android, iOS]**

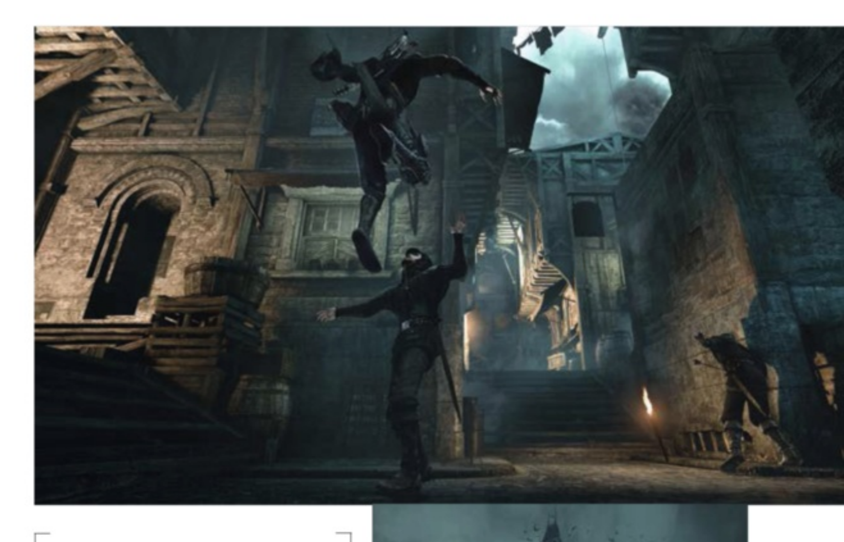
High Point

While outsourcing boss battles may have been a terrible call, the majority of *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* combined intense action and inventive stealth gameplay, proving a young Eidos Montreal's worth.

a character when you're playing as them and know their strengths – saying 'Hey, I'm a master thief', you wouldn't then walk into a war and take on everybody." The game is geared to directing you towards the shadows, to languidly holding back in the dark, observing your enemies and watching their patrol routes. You want to get into that window, that room, that safe where the best haul is. And you don't want anyone to know you've done it. It gets into your head, that completionist part of you, telling you 'No, you cannot be detected; you must take this painting without anyone knowing. You. Are. A. *Thief*.'

"[Garrett's] ultimate objective is that prized piece of loot – that gold, that crown, whatever – that is his objective. Not killing, not death. If an enemy comes in and there's no way of avoiding him, then violence becomes an option. That's part of [his] character's personality." It's refreshing to see a game that almost forces this pacifism upon you – while there are stealth takedowns available, they're all non-lethal, and the game rewards you for remaining undetected and non-violent throughout bonus missions and, we assume, the main game. Combat is so punishing and counter-productive that it really makes you think of combat as an absolute last resort.

It's a credit to the overall stealth mechanics of the game that a completely phantom playthrough is available, and not actually that difficult to pull off. Blending into the shadows is seamless, and accurately represents the mastery Garrett has over his surroundings. The whole thing plays like a medieval Batman-meets-Robin Hood thieving simulator with elements of *Dishonored* thrown in. It'll set off your inner kleptomaniac, and you'll love it for doing so.



Above: Aerial takedowns are available if you want to swoop down and pick off guards, one by one. Below: One of our favourite things was the ability to break into certain buildings, all of which offered a different aesthetic from the exterior.





1



2

The Crew

CONCEPT ■ A hybrid of role-playing and massively-multiplayer, *The Crew* plonks players into an open and persistent world of racing set across the United States.

So Solid...

While Ubisoft's *The Crew* is one of the first titles out the gate for the third-party publisher crafted exclusively for the next-generation, it almost seems to have stalled at the starting block. That's perhaps due to being pipped to the post by *DriveClub*, Sony's flagship PlayStation 4 racer similarly themed around a vast, persistent world, layered with social networking and multiplayer driving. There are some clear differences between the two, though, not least the pervasive anarchic attitude that encourages both a competitive and destructive mindset from its players. **games™** took part in a challenge that tasked us with taking down an all-terrain vehicle across a Miami beachscape, racing alongside another driver, both scrambling to deal the final defeating blow against the target. It's a chase scenario we've played countless times in the past but there's an unmissable touch of jocularity underlining the slick mechanics.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One
Origin: France
Publisher: Ubisoft
Developer: Ivory Tower
Release: 2014
Players: 1-Massively multiplayer

Developer Profile

Based in Lyon, France, Ivory Tower was founded in 2007 by industry veterans that have worked across franchises such as *Need For Speed*, *V-Rally* and *Test Drive Unlimited*. The studio's debut title, *The Crew*, will put their expertise in the racing genre to the test, utilising their own next-gen tools to bring an innovative new racer to the market for Sony and Microsoft's new consoles.

Developer History

The Crew
2014 [Multi]

High Point

It's too early to tell whether *The Crew* will live up to the promises of the developer, but it's undoubtedly an ambitious launch vehicle for the studio.

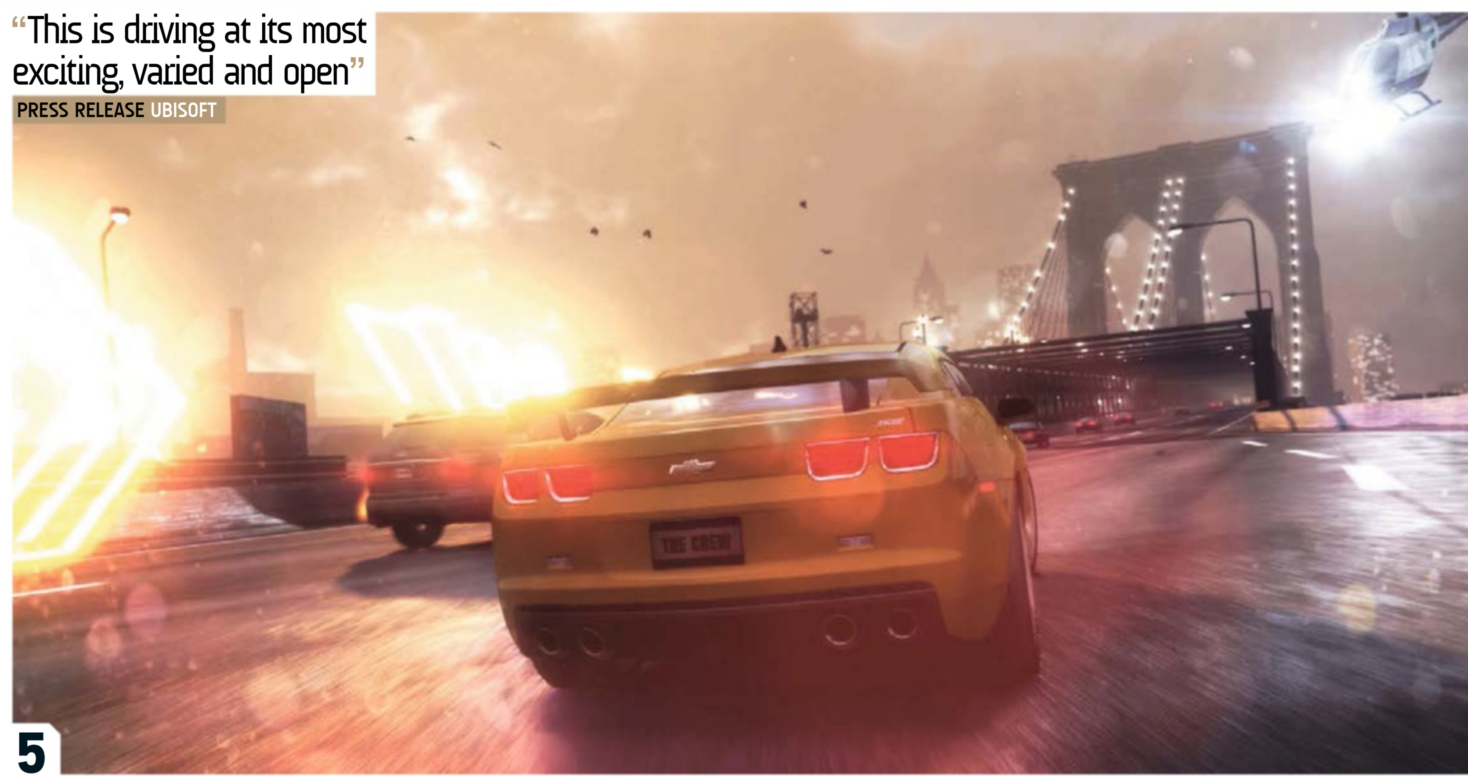
1 IT'S A MASSIVE OPEN-WORLD PLAYGROUND

The game is open from the start and, as you might expect, is littered with race events for players to participate. New challenges spring up across the map that can be entered instantly, enabling players to seamlessly compete with other drivers in the area. Some involve hitting checkpoints within a time limit, while others, like hurtling through traffic at top speed without colliding, are more inventive. There are also solo and crew-based missions (the latter involving a squad you can create compromising of three additional drivers), encountering other drivers and engaging in team battles for XP that can be used to customise your vehicle.


3


4

"This is driving at its most exciting, varied and open"
PRESS RELEASE UBISOFT



5

2 YOUR CAR IS AN EXTENSION OF YOUR PERSONALITY

As much emphasis has been placed on the vehicles themselves as it has building an immersive online world to drive around. *The Crew* was designed to tap into car culture, with vehicle customisation paramount to in-game progression. You start by picking a licensed car that suits you from the selection and then spend the game accruing XP through events that can be used to buy new performance parts and tweak the car's appearance. The idea is to approach car customisation in much the same way that role-playing games and FPSs utilise perks to create a unique user experience.

3 YOU CAN DRIVE AROUND THE WHOLE OF THE USA

According to its developer, *The Crew*'s map spans a staggering 5,000 square kilometres in size. That's used to create a truncated proxy of the United States, boasting as much iconography and environmental diversity as it possibly can across all 50 states. There's no loading between environments, and you could feasibly drive from New York to Los Angeles, which can take a few hours. It's not a perfect facsimile by any means, but a greatest hits of American iconography is more than enough to whet our appetite. Besides, we'd cut out most of the American Midwest anyway (we're only joking, of course).

4 YOU'RE ALWAYS PART OF A TEAM

Yes, *The Crew* is all about, unsurprisingly, assembling your own team of law-defying drivers that tackle missions together as a unit. You can build a team of friends, or strangers on the fly, and while you can ignore this and play the game solo, it's an intrinsic part of the experience. Players will progress faster by working together and the option for unique challenges will become available. However, there's an element of competitiveness within your crew, as players who accumulate the most points are rewarded with the larger spoils. So, no room for slacking off.

5 UBISOFT HAS CREATED A PARTNER APP

Ubisoft knows what the kids want these days. *The Crew* comes with its own app on mobile and tablet devices, which interacts with the main game on consoles. *Watch Dogs* boasts a similar proposition (albeit, a more engaging and gameplay-centric one) but *The Crew* enables players to change and customise their vehicle that will then be reflected in-game. It can even be used to quickly change cars as online challenges wait to load – important when switching terrain and surfaces between matches. But will players respond to such an add-on in the way Ubisoft is expecting?

Given how bizarre some of the situations in *Deadly Premonition* were, it doesn't surprise us that David Young ends up in an airplane bathroom.



LOST THE PLOT?

SWERY65 EXPLAINED THAT he does not yet know how many episodes of *D4* will be released, or when the first one will be made available, suggesting that there is not yet a definitive plan for how the game's main story arc will be paced. Given how keen the designer is to promote the game as being something to a TV series, this could be viewed as a legitimate concern with the first episode expected within the Xbox One's 'launch window'. What we do know is that episodes will run for roughly two hours and each will tell a self-contained story that plays into the main plot.

Above: As you can see, *D4* is going for a comic book look not all too dissimilar to that used in Telltale's *The Walking Dead*, albeit with a great deal more colour and a busier HUD during combat. Right: We're convinced that Swery65 is going for a protagonist who's just as weird as Francis York Morgan, not to mention a supporting cast who will contribute to the story in their own baffling ways.





D4

CONCEPT ■ An adventure title with a unique spin, *D4* is as much about seeking hidden clues as it about synchronised attacks on the genitals and QTEs.

The Xbox One exclusive that proves Kinect is worth the premium price?

D4 is better with Kinect, insists game director Hidetaka 'Swery65' Suehiro. The game has been designed for Kinect, the gameplay makes more sense with Kinect and you can eat popcorn while playing with Kinect. That's the whole idea behind *D4*, to make a game that feels like you're watching a quality TV show… all the way down to the snacks on the couch.

Dark Dreams Don't Die, to give *D4* its full title, is a murder mystery that will unravel over the course of a number of episodes. The protagonist is one David Young, a man on a mission to uncover the truth behind the untimely murder of his wife. Naturally, Young has been blessed with physic abilities that allow him to travel through time and space using seemingly random clue objects (dubbed 'Mementos') found in each episode. It all sounds a little odd until you consider that this has been designed by the man behind such off-the-wall gems as *Deadly Premonition* and *Spy Fiction*. Suddenly, using a ballpoint pen to time travel directly into an airplane's bathroom makes perfect sense. Kind of.

And that's where our demo begins, Young alone in a passenger jet's bathroom at 30,000 feet and the letter 'D' his only clue to unravelling the mystery of this particular episode. Navigating through the plane and interacting with objects is done with your right hand; opening and closing your hand initiates basic interactions such as opening luggage compartments, while swiping to the left or right turns Young 90 degrees to allow you a better look around the environment. Pointing towards the screens moves you forward or, if you're standing in of the toilet, pushes the flush button.

/// There were some neat Kinect controls on display. Touching two fingers to your forehead in a kind of psychic concentration pose causes you to enter a heat vision mode of sorts, the screen switching to a monochrome palette with interactive items glowing yellow. This trick eats up your stamina bar, a resource that was built up in the plane's bathroom. You can also select dialogue options by saying them out loud.

After some poking around, it turns out that a US marshal is aboard your flight transporting a drug smuggler to trial. Using his extra-sensory perceptions, Young realises that said marshal is somehow linked to his wife's death. However, before any serious questions can be asked, our drug smuggler friend, Antonio, seizes his opportunity and proceeds to beat the marshal to death without putting so much a crease in his flamboyant purple suit.

What then happens is a series of quick-time events to end all quick-time events. Young versus Antonio involves the usual sets of dodging and throwing punches, alongside a healthy dollop of attacks to the nether regions, ballroom dancing with female passengers and destroying Duncan the fashion designer's mannequin 'partner'. Access Games keen to point out that "both balls" were hit upon the relevant QTE being performed perfectly.

All of these triggers require movements with one or two hands, with the action on screen reacting to your success or failure. At one point Young puts a megaphone to the Antonio's face, with the player needing to scream at Kinect in a bid to burst his eardrums. Later on you need to swing your arms in time to use the aforementioned mannequin's disembodied leg to hit a baseball into Antonio's face, the resulting impact knocking his glass eye clean out of its socket. Thankfully, it doesn't seem as though you need to perform too many inputs to succeed and get through the encounter, thus allowing you to enjoy the onscreen antics rather than constantly worry about nailing the next QTE.

> "You can play while eating popcorn in a group with your friends, like you're watching a TV show"
>
> HIDETAKA SUEHIRO ACCESS GAMES

What's evident is that Swery65 is a man very comfortable when it comes to doing things his own way, with little to no concession made to staying within 'normal' design rules. Is there any better reason to add *D4* to your watch list?

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox One
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Microsoft
Developer: Access Games
Release: TBA (Japan: TBA/US: TBA)
Players: 1

Developer Profile

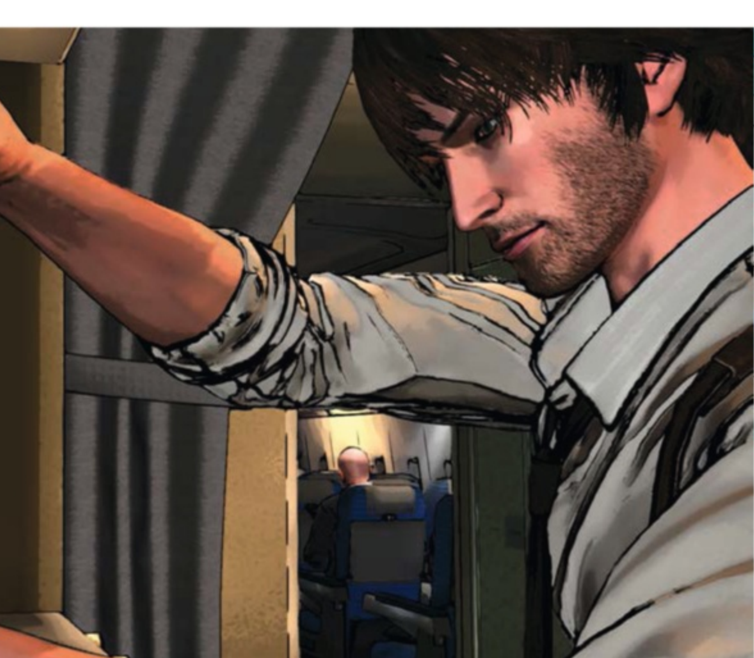
Hidetaka "Swery65" Suehiro is out to prove that Suda51 isn't the only game designer capable of pulling off a flashy nickname or making a career out of insane concepts. Swery65's games are notable for their reluctance to adhere to the norm.

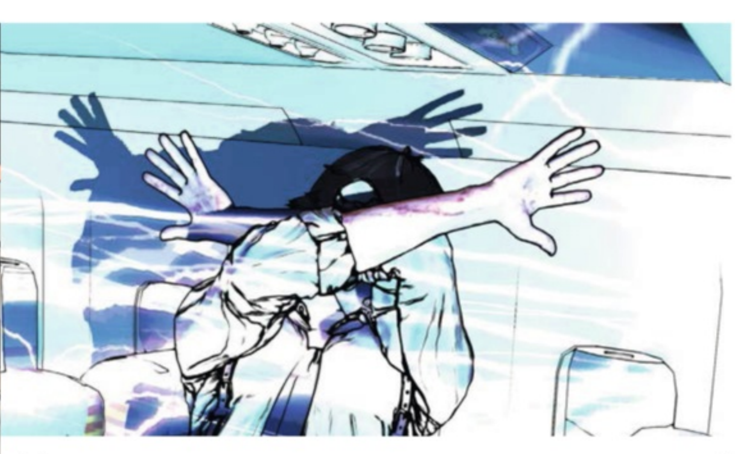
Developer History

Ace Combat: Joint Assault **2010 [PlayStation Portable]**
Deadly Premonition **2010 [PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC]**
Spy Fiction **2003 [PlayStation 2]**

High Point

Deadly Premonition, so bad it's good. With very questionable gameplay, iffy voice acting and a ludicrous script, it's loved for its charming failures.





■ Left: Not all Kinect inputs are essential to gameplay. Everything from pouring drinks to flushing toilets is done with motion controls.

Hotline Miami 2: Wrong Number

CONCEPT ■ The follow-up to last year's breakthrough indie hit, *Hotline Miami 2* returns to the brutal fast-paced slaughter of 1989 Miami.

Hammer it home

After *Hotline Miami* burst onto the indie scene like a blood-drenched love letter to Nicolas Winding Refn's *Drive* – which conspicuously resembled a videogame itself, *Grand Theft Auto* – and rampaged through several stages of neon-lit trauma and gratuitousness, there was only one way to go. More. *Hotline Miami 2: Wrong Number* dials the excess up, boasting more enemies, weapons and gore for the masses that gorged on the original's trim cut of frenzied action.

Thankfully, the sequel doesn't stray far from the template of *Hotline Miami* One; it's still a test of skill and nerve as you're placed inside a series of elaborately crafted death chambers with various enemies planted across each floor, tasking you with clearing each area in creative ultra-violent means. However, with a minimal resistance to bullets, the whole scenario is framed around razor-sharp blink-and-you're-dead action that refuses to pause for subtlety or taste.

The main addition of the sequel is new characters. The story expands the cast significantly and follows the events of the first game. Jacket's exploits have not only inspired a group of vigilantes that have taken to Miami streets to rid crime in a similar grisly fashion, but also Hollywood to create a movie based on the same events. But it's more than just a retread of *Hotline Miami*, instead playing out an uncompromising commentary on the typically derivative nature of contemporary entertainment. Either that or a remake of a game inspired by a movie inspired by a game (that itself was inspired by multiple films). It's enough to make your head explode.

FACE OFF

■ ONE OF the main mechanics in *Hotline Miami* was the use of animal masks that could be selected at the start of each mission to award special perks. This alters the template slightly in the sequel. As the narrative splits into different factions, specific masks will only be available in each missions depending on the context. However, masks from the original will return, albeit rebalanced, while there are new additions, such as the Zebra mask that enables the protagonist to jump through windows.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PlayStation 4, PS Vita
Origin: Sweden
Publisher: Devolver Digital
Developer: Dennaton Games
Release: Early 2014
Players: 1

Developer Profile

The fresh-faced developer currently operating out of Sweden is formed of Jonatan Söderström and Dennis Wedin, who became last year's indie darlings with the confident debut of *Hotline Miami.* Since porting the game to almost every platform imaginable, the duo has been knuckling down on the sequel (already courting controversy) due next year.

Developer History

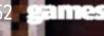
Hotline Miami 2: Wrong Number
2014 [Multi]

Hotline Miami
2012 [Multi]



High Point

Retro visuals, slick gameplay, funky soundtrack and laced with cinematic references, the original *Hotline Miami* was an assured success.





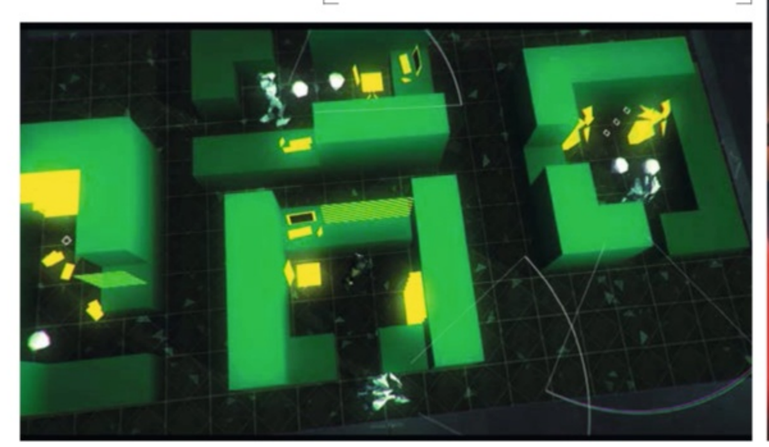
HOLLYWOOD NIGHTS

TAKING ITS cue from Jacket's ending at the close of *Hotline Miami*, the sequel takes place both before and after the original game in an elaborately meta fashion. The Pig Butcher is the protagonist; although he's actually a character within a movie titled *Midnight Animal* that re-enacts the events of Jacket's murder spree. The other side of the story is a told from the perspective of The Fans, a group of vigilantes obsessed with Jacket who embark on their own wave of murders.

BRUTAL BEHAVIOUR

DENNATON GAMES' debut garnered high praise for its rage-inducing twitchy gameplay; an unapologetic challenge of player resolve and determination. Appealing to the masochistic among its fans, the developer has seen fit to bolster the difficulty for hardcore players. Hard Mode will be included in the sequel, with more taxing versions of levels (lock-on will be removed, for example) unlocked by achieving C+ or above in a stage.

■ Below: It's screenshots like this that expose the deep influences *Metal Gear Solid* has had on the game – this is like Shadow Moses via *Tron*.





INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4, PSVita
Origin: England
Publisher: Mike Bithell
Developer: Mike Bithell
Release: 2014
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Mike Bithell exploded onto the indie games scene with the geometric friendship-simulator *Thomas Was Alone* last summer. Having worked with Bossa Studios to release *Thomas* on consoles, Bithell is now going fully indie again for *Volume*, along with his small but specialised team – featuring David Housden, who was responsible for *Thomas*' acclaimed soundtrack.

High Point

Thomas Was Alone relied on gripping narration to imbue characterless rectangles with distinct personalities – a strange concept but one that was pulled off with aplomb. Setting the narrative alongside level design that introduced mechanics in a smooth trajectory, all underlined by an understated and fitting score, *Thomas* established Bithell as an important name in the games industry.

Volume

CONCEPT ■ A modder-friendly crime stealth game with a focus on level creation and stealing anything that isn't nailed down.

This is the rhythm of the night

The stealth genre is awash with games that focus on presentation more than their gameplay – it feels like the new *Metal Gear*s and *Splinter Cell*s are more focused on delivering cinematic adventures, with impressive setpieces to be discussed and dissected, rather than puzzling the player with tricky level design or challenging them with intuitive enemies.

Mike Bithell's *Volume* takes the minimalist design of *Thomas Was Alone* and repurposes it for stealth, albeit with a deeper aesthetic value that – we imagine – is going to look pretty stunning on the PS4. Everything is geometric, and the uniform cleanness of the game design feels like it allows the player to engage with the mechanics at a fundamental level – there's nothing obscuring your view of the parameters in which yourself and your enemies move in; all your restraints are visible.

The game seems to have a focus on the purity of the stealth genre – enemies that patrol the 100-strong roster of levels in the game have a visible cone of sight in front of them, marking *Volume* strongly as a stealth game that clearly won't be going for gritty realism but gameplay. It's your nameless protagonist's job to avoid detection and steal everything that you can get your hands on.

You cannot fight in *Volume* – Bithell has stated that the game is a "crime-simulator" – so the end-game never includes death. Enemies can be incapacitated, but it seems the main focus is to ghost your way through the levels: this is a "crime-simulator", after all, and thieves don't realistically want to get caught. The game is fairly fast-paced, and we predict friends battling it out on leaderboards to see who can clear rooms the quickest. It's this arcade-machine potential that has us excited about *Volume* – it could conceivably be the *Trials* of stealth games.

Much like *Trials*, there's a heavy focus on creating and "remixing" levels, too. Players can make use of an in-game level editor to play around with the foundation designs Bithell includes with the main game, with an emphasis on sharing these retouched levels with online communities. It seems like the focus here is influenced by *Minecraft*, in a way – hoping the inherent minimalism of the game design will allow players to realise their own levels in a quick and simple fashion.

> "Volume is a stealth game about being heard"
> MIKE BITHELL INDIE DEVELOPER

Bithell promises to announce more about the story and protagonist of *Volume* soon, but right now those details feel secondary to the crisp design we've seen in the game. Where *Thomas Was Alone* benefitted from the narrative overlay, we think it might feel a bit arbitrary in *Volume* – this game works as an arcade title, and we're worried a narrative component may make the game feel bloated. We trust Bithell, though, and eagerly await more news on *Volume*.



■ Above: The misleadingly simple level designs look like they'll have us scratching our heads for hours, searching for the perfect 'ghost' method of working through them.





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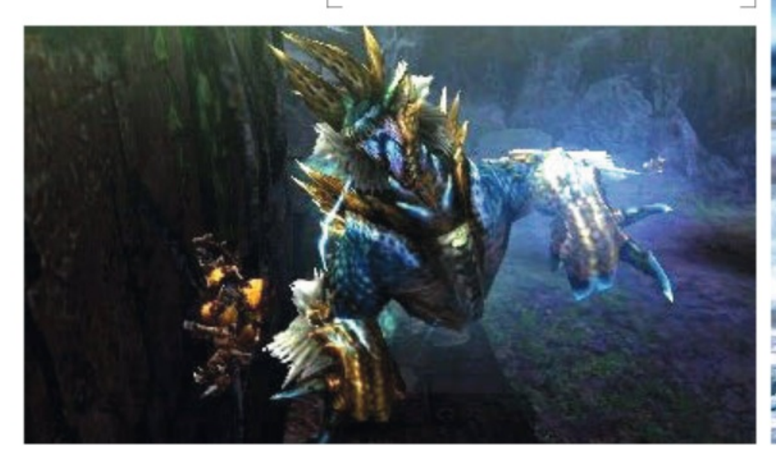
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Below: The likes of Zinogre, Rathalos and Deviljho return in addition to over 15 new monsters. Watch out for Goa Magara! Hardcore players will appreciate these details.





INFORMATION

Details

Format: 3DS
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Capcom
Developer: In-house
Release: TBA
Players: 1-4

Developer Profile

As one of the most prominent Japanese developers, it's fair to say that Capcom needs no introduction. It's responsible for everything from *Street Fighter*, *Resident Evil* and *Devil May Cry* to *Mega Man*, *Onimusha* and *Strider*. Some of its most recent titles include *Dragon's Dogma* and *Lost Planet 3*.

Developer History

Dead Rising **2006 [Xbox 360]**
Monster Hunter **2004 [PS2]**
Resident Evil **1996 [PS1]**
Street Fighter II: The World Warrior **1991 [Arcade]**

High Point

It's more a question of which genre you prefer the most. Even so, we have a special place in our hearts for the truly timeless *Super Street Fighter IV*.

Monster Hunter 4

CONCEPT Up to four hunters team up to take down a large monster before turning its component parts into sturdy equipment, only this time, the hunting grounds over much more verticality.

What's that coming over the hill?

It used to be that *Monster Hunter* and the PSP were a match made in heaven, as even if Capcom took ages to localise the next instalment in the west, diehard fans could import and play with minimal hassle. But with the series' migration to the 3DS, Nintendo's insistence on region-locking means that *Monster Hunter 4* will sadly remain a strictly Japanese luxury for the foreseeable future. Unless, of course, you take the costly measure of importing a 3DS and hoping you don't get stung too harshly by the import tax.

The most significant change from *Monster Hunter 3 Ultimate* is that rather than underwater hunting, the segmented maps are now much more vertical. You can climb up a cliff, cling from a dangling stalactite and even ascend a spider's web before forcing a monster to fall through. Better yet, the game features a new mount ability whereby you jump on a monster's back, stab them repeatedly with the carving knife and hope that you can just hold on long enough to make them stumble for an easy combo opportunity.

The combat system retains the same weighted sophistication that the series has tempered over the last eight years – almost to a fault. But thanks to the entirely new maps and variety of monsters, the game doesn't feel too familiar. The new Garara Ajara, for instance, is a snake wyvern that can shoot deafening scales from its tail before trying to catch you in a constricting attack. This can only be avoided by diving through the gap between its tail and its head. There's also a new arachnid-style monster that can ensnare you with its sticky silk.

It's encouraging that Capcom has taken the time to think a little outside the box as the last game was a bit of a dragon and dinosaurfest, and while the series has always featured some kind of single player element, *Monster Hunter 4* ups the ante with a more fleshed out narrative that spans four different villages. And for those who fancy a change from the familiar Dual Sword combos and Gunlance barrages, the new Charge Axe and Insect Staff offer some interesting alternatives.

> "We decided that… having valleys and different layers of terrain would add more variation to the action"
>
> KANAME FUJIOKA MONSTER HUNTER 4 DIRECTOR

The Charge Axe can switch between two different weapon forms – including a sword and shield – while the Insect Staff functions similarly to the Long Sword. It also lets you command a large flying insect that can absorb various buffs from the targeted monster. These are just some of the more meaningful changes that Capcom has worked into the established formula. We still don't know how the armour skills have changed and what to expect from G-rank, but based on this kanji shrouded evidence, *Monster Hunter 4* is deserving of a western release.



Above: The easiest way to get on a monster's back in *Monster Hunter 4* is to use the Insect Staff like a makeshift vaulting pole. A handy tip for when the game finally lands here.



> "Being single-player we've been able to streamline inputs to the point where it might not be competitively balanced if we had multiplayer"
>
> MASAKI HOSHINO NAMCO BANDAI



Only three characters have been announced, with more likely to arrive after release à la *Tekken Revolution*.

SoulCalibur: Lost Swords

CONCEPT Free-to-play single-player fighter with an emphasis on weapon collecting and upgrading, aimed at those players with no interest in competitive multiplayer.

Namco Bandai takes control of the elements in bid to conquer the free-to-play space

Buoyed by the success of *Tekken Revolution*, *SoulCalibur: Lost Swords* is Namco Bandai's next attempt at fighting its way into free-to-play. Aimed squarely at those who enjoy simply being a part of the world characterised by samurai, medieval Germans and *Star Wars* cameos, there is no competitive multiplayer mode. A single-player fighter in 2014… blasphemy?

Presently, three playable characters have been confirmed: Mitsurugi, Seigfried and Sophitia (the latter being absent from the series since 2008's *SoulCalibur IV*). A smaller roster is an attempt to have you interact more deeply with the new 'Element System', which embeds weapons with statistical buffs and abilities. Five elements are present along the usual earth, wind and fire variations, with a rock-paper-scissors-type approach determining their relative effectiveness in battle.

New weapons are acquired by beating enemies, with importance placed on collecting a wide variety to make sure you've always got a suitable option to counter your next opponent's setup. Weapons can be combined to create more powerful iterations, with series producer Masaki Hoshino warning that *Lost Swords*' rarest acquisitions can only be obtained by forging them yourself. The advice is not to simply sell everything you're not currently using.

Free-to-play gaming is all about drawing players in for the long haul, so the attempt at deeper, loot-based collection elements is hardly a surprise. Indeed, they're par for the chosen course. At the time of writing there is no word on how *Lost Swords* will be monetised, the hope being that these very systems designed to keep you engaged for more than a week are not compromised when optional payments are included. The single-player focus, however, removes any concerns of other players having a direct advantage over you in battle.

If you're still having trouble progressing after creating yourself the best elemental weapon you can muster, it's possible to call in the help of a friend. While there's no competitive multiplayer, there is an asynchronous system that allows you to ally with a friend's 'ghost' in battle. The ghost, identical to the one its owner is currently using, fights alongside and turns the brawl into a two-against-one affair.

This is not a fighter designed to seriously engage the hardcore crowd, then. Alongside the element and ghost systems, *Lost Swords* employs a streamlined edition of the *SoulCalibur V* engine aimed at simplifying the inputs required for big moves. Clearly, Namco Bandai is attempting to court the crowd turned off by the technicalities of the series' arcade/console releases. Winning over a causal and hardcore crowd with a single franchise is a tough ask, but you're onto a winner if you can do it.

Weapons create differently coloured lighting effects depending on which elements they're associated with.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PlayStation 3
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Namco Bandai
Developer: In-house
Release: 2014
Genre: Beat-'em-up
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Masaki Hoshino has been a member of the *SoulCalibur* development team since the series launched in 1996. Working as a programmer on early releases, Hoshino got his big break on *SoulCalibur IV* where he became lead programmer, before moving on to the role of Technical Programming Director on *SoulCalibur V*.

Developer History

Soul Edge
1996 [Arcade]
SoulCalibur
1999 [Dreamcast]
SoulCalibur IV
2008 [PlayStation 3, Xbox 360]
SoulCalibur V
2012 [PlayStation 3, Xbox 360]

High Point

SoulCalibur IV remains the highlight for the series, not least for the depth of its character customisation and the strength of its online play.

Below: Our demo only offered the chance to use four weapons, but we reckon there's going to be a whole array of ridiculous implements with which to dismember the walking undead in the final release.





Yaiba: Ninja Gaiden Z

CONCEPT Ninjas, zombies, a tale of revenge and buckets of gore.

Gratuitous grindhouse zombie action

With the disappointing launch of *Ninja Gaiden 3* underwhelming critics and consumers, it's no surprise that the developers decided to undertake a massive divergence from the aesthetic of the main franchise – it's more than just the graphical presentation of *Yaiba* that's different from the original series; this game is almost unrecognisable as a *Ninja Gaiden* title. This rebellion against the conventions of the primary series seem to be echoed in the thematic layout of *Yaiba* – player character Yaiba Kamikaze is shown being sliced to pieces by ex-protagonist Ryu Hayabusa at the start of the demo we played, laughing maniacally as his body falls apart. He blacks out, and reawakens with his body recomposed with cybernetic upgrades. Yaiba – apparently an unhinged sociopath – sets on a revenge quest to slay Hayabusa and make him pay for ever daring to cut Yaiba down.

It's a pretty straightforward story, then, but it seems relevant that the goal is to destroy the symbolic figurehead of the main *Ninja Gaiden* series. It's a statement that Inafune and his development teams are making – 'Here's how radically different we want this game to be', they're saying, 'This is what we think of you, Hayabusa.' The gameplay reflects this heel-turn, too; where the main *Ninja Gaiden* instalments focus on measured, technical gameplay, *Yaiba* feels like a button-masher – more *Dynasty Warriors* than anything else.

Yaiba himself dashes around the screen fairly clumsily, with sweeping attacks that spill blood *everywhere*. Take out a shambling group of enemy undead, and most of the battle arena will be painted with bright red gore. Where *Ninja Gaiden* used to have a tactical focus – take out the most dangerous enemies in a group whilst suppressing the weaker drones – *Yaiba* seems more intent on satiating a perverse satisfaction: everything is bloody, squelchy and slick, cartoonified to pastiche by the cel-shaded graphics. There's no crowd-control strategy in play here, it's a very diluted *Ninja* experience.

A couple of the combat features help maintain the game's momentum – slap an enemy around enough and they'll stand dazed, allowing you to execute them and rip off various parts of their body to use as weapons. The most satisfyingly violent of these are the 'numb-chucks': arms ripped off bigger enemies that can used to pulverise crowds of the bumbling undead with a lispy meat-on-meat sound effect on every impact.

In an industry that seems to have forgotten about the double-A game, *Yaiba* actually feels refreshing. It may not be particularly polished or innovative in its offerings, but it makes no allusions that it's trying to be anything other than delirious fun. It's the B-movie of videogames; the games industry's answer to *From Dusk Till Dawn.* Yaiba feels like a Tarantino project with a cut budget – an end-of-the-generation 'Why not?' project and, oddly enough, we find that kind of creative devil-may-care attitude rather reassuring.

> "The art style that we have for Yaiba is something we haven't done before. People have been very receptive to the art style – there are a lot of games out there but it seems Yaiba stands out"
>
> YOSUKE HAYASHI TEAM NINJA

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Temco Koei
Developer: Team Ninja, Comcept, Spark Unlimited
Release: Q2 2014
Genre: Hack-'n'-slash
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Yaiba is from three devs; Team Ninja, responsible for the main *Ninja Gaiden* entries; Spark Unlimited, the American developer of *Lost Planet 3*; Keiji Inafune's company Comcept also oversaw development.

Developer History

Ninja Gaiden 3
2012 [PS3, Xbox 360]

Legendary
2008 [PS3, Xbox 360, PC]

Call of Duty: Finest Hour
2004 [PS2, Gamecube, Xbox]

Dead or Alive
1996 [Sega Saturn, PlayStation]

High Point

Many consider Team Ninja's *Ninja Gaiden 2* as the height of the hack-'n'-slash genre: balancing punishing difficulty with gratifying reward.

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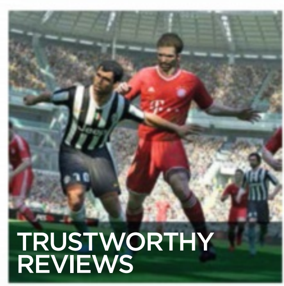
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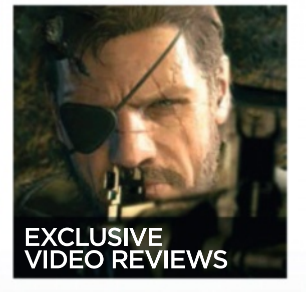

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LA-MULANA 2

Format: PC
Publisher: Nigoro
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2014



A SEQUEL that forgoes the Egyptian theme of its predecessor in favour of a Nordic setting, *La-Mulana 2* is an indie adventure that follows the exploits of a vault-raiding spelunker, armed only with a whip. Running on a new engine (the same one used to port the prequel's remakes), *La-Mulana 2* will be presented in a widescreen aspect ratio, making the 2D retro-styled platformer less straining on the eyes.

CUBEAT

Format: PC
Publisher: Team PSC
Developer: In-house
ETA: December 2013



REMINISCENT OF *Super Puzzle Fighter II*, *CuBeat* is a match-'em-up block game that revolves around a multiplayer dynamic: using a free-floating mouse to destroy blocks of the same colour, you create chains to achieve a higher score than your opponent. Unlike other games in the same genre, the cursor is completely loose, allowing you to destroy one block at a time, if it suits your strategy.

HERO EMBLEMS

Format: iOS
Publisher: HeatPot Games
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2014



A HYBRID of a match-three puzzler and side-scrolling beat-'em-up, *Hero Emblems* is a colourful tribute to old-school RPGs. Each match you make in the puzzle section of the board corresponds to an attack in the RPG realm. Buffs and debuffs can be achieved through chaining links, and the chibi-style aesthetic of the game promises to deliver a legitimate JRPG experience to iOS.

THE VANISHING OF ETHAN CARTER

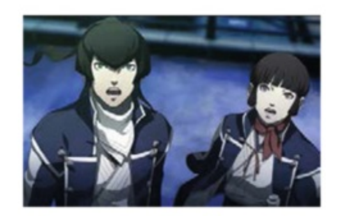
Format: PC
Publisher: The Astronauts
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2014



A STUDIO formed by ex-People Can Fly staff, The Astronauts will release its first game – a first-person horror game – for PC in 2014, with aims to get the game onto next-gen consoles after launch. Inspired by macabre and weird literature of the 20th Century, the Unreal Engine 3-powered game looks haunting and promises to utilise the layered storytelling capability only games can offer.

SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI IV

Format: 3DS
Publisher: Atlus
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2013



RELEASED IN North America back in July, there is still no word as to the European release. The demon-centric RPG features deep customisation, a complex recruitment system and advanced visuals that really show what the 3DS is capable of. We expect the delay is so protracted because the game features full voice acting, and localising voiceovers to European regions traditionally takes months.

MIND ZERO

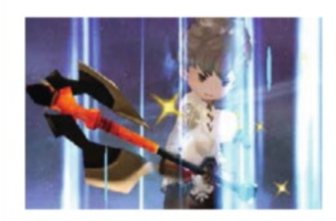
Format: PS Vita
Publisher: GungHo Online Entertainment
Developer: Acquire, ZeroDiv
ETA: 2013



REMINISCENT OF *Persona 4*, the stylish JRPG is a dungeon-crawling epic set inside a Japanese High School. Similarly to the aforementioned Atlus title, each player character has a demon persona that acts as a familiar to the cast as they head into battle. The narrative seems to involve solving a mystery – yet another nod to *Persona* – but all we care about is the ability to play as a girl that has machine-gun arms.

BRAVELY DEFAULT: FOR THE SEQUEL

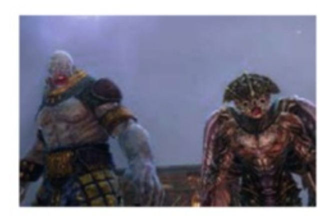
Format: 3DS
Publisher: Square Enix
Developer: Access Games
ETA: Winter 2013



FOR THE *Sequel* isn't actually a sequel, confusingly enough – it's a remake of a 3DS RPG that comes with new content, updated graphics and other unannounced improvements. Where the original, *Bravely Default*, didn't make it over to the West, *For The Sequel* looks like it'll drop on our shores later this year, with Square Enix already filing trademarks for additional titles in the series.

NOSGOTH

Format: PC
Publisher: Square Enix
Developer: Psyonix
ETA: Q1 2014

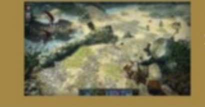


USING THE world created by the *Legacy Of Kain* games as a base for online multiplayer combat, *Nosgoth* pits humans against vampires in a war set after the events of *Soul Reaver*. Promising to be a 'live' game that will be continually updated, *Nosgoth* will be free-to-play and will focus on the battle dynamic between ranged and melee-weapons. Registrations for the beta are open through *Nosgoth*'s website now.



DELAYED – Kinect Sports Rivals (Xbox One)

Originally planned to be a launch title, Rare's Xbox One debut has been pushed back to Spring 2014 – needing more time to achieve the level of polish the developer and Microsoft want from the flagship Kinect title.

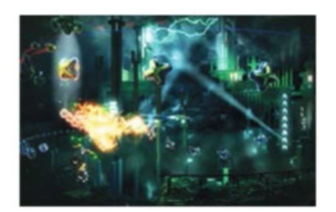


DELAYED – Divinity: Original Sin (PC, Mac)

The Kickstarter update to *Divinity* was originally announced back in May 2012, but has been delayed until 28 February 2014 due to the stretch goals apparently taking longer than anticipated.

RESOGUN

Format: **PS4**
Publisher: **Focus Home Interactive**
Developer: **Housemarque**
ETA: **15 November (US), 29 November (EU)**



SHOWING OFF the graphical fidelity of the PS4 this early on should be difficult, but Housemarque seems to have gotten to grips with the hardware quickly, producing a game that runs at 60fps and is generated from thousands of cubes in a voxel-based engine. Each voxel is individually animated, and the game glows with a neon vibe. It looks like *Geometry Wars* meets *Ikaruga* – what more do we need to say?

SORCERY SAGA: CURSE OF THE GREAT CURRY GOD

Format: **PS Vita**
Publisher: **Aksys Games**
Developer: **Idea Factory**
ETA: **Winter 2013**



THE ODDLY-TITLED roguelike RPG sees the main character, Pupuru, throwing herself headfirst into dark dungeons to seek out ingredients for a legendary curry. You can boost your stats by consuming special curries within dungeons – an interesting and unique premise that should add a bit of extra depth to the roguelike mechanic the game is built around. The special edition ships with a set of kitchenware.

RAYMAN FIESTA RUN

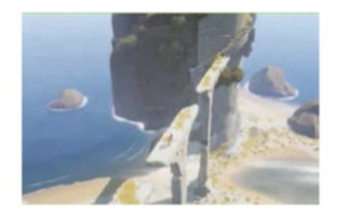
Format: **iOS, Android**
Publisher: **Ubisoft**
Developer: **Ubisoft Casablanca**
ETA: **2014**



THE LIMBLESS hero makes his way to mobile platforms to show the endless runner genre how it's done. Built on the same UBIart framework of its console-based cousin, *Fiesta Run* looks stunning, and makes the most of the retina displays of the screens it's designed for. There are 75 levels over four new worlds that will feature boss battles and invasion levels, as per *Rayman Legends*.

RIME

Format: **PS4**
Publisher: **Sony Computer Entertainment**
Developer: **Tequila Works**
ETA: **2014**



AFTER RELEASING *Deadlight* in 2012, Tequila Works has moved on to producing content for next-gen hardware. Looking like the lovechild of *Journey* and *Ico*, *Rime* is a cel-shaded exploration game set on a deserted island. One of the flagship titles of Sony's indie push, we expect *Rime* to cement Tequila Works' position as one of the more experimental developers rising to the fore.

ULTRA STREET FIGHTER IV

Format: **Multi**
Publisher: **Capcom**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2014**



WITH AN original console release four years ago, and three previous updated versions, Capcom is giving *Street Fighter IV* one more push before the next generation comes to life. Coming to PS3, 360 and PC, *Ultra* adds four fighters from other Capcom games and one more as yet un-revealed new fighter. The updated version will also include new stages, a game rebalance and new modes.

SOULCALIBUR II HD ONLINE

Format: **Xbox 360, PS3**
Publisher: **Nicalis Inc**
Developer: **Nicalis Inc**
ETA: **2014**



THE HD re-release of *SoulCalibur II* comes with online compatibility, allowing the brawler to be played across Live and PSN for the first time. It will feature both Heihachi and Spawn over both consoles – both of whom were previously platform exclusives. The game should offer a nostalgic antidote for those that dislike the idea of the new *SoulCalibur* F2P that launches at roughly the same time.

FINAL FANTASY AGITO

Format: **iOS, Android**
Publisher: **Square Enix**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2014**



MOBILE FINAL *Fantasy* releases don't have the greatest reputation. *Agito* seems different, however. Acting as a sort-of prequel to *Final Fantasy Type-0*, *Agito* is part-high school sim, part-date sim and part real-time battle RPG. Apparently imbued with an important social side, *Agito* looks like a real *FF* game running on a mobile platform, and to be honest, that's enough to grab our attention.

SOUL SACRIFICE DELTA

Format: **PS Vita**
Publisher: **Sony Computer Entertainment**
Developer: **SCE Japan Studio**
ETA: **2014**



THE UPDATED re-release of the morality-testing action-adventure game introduces a new mechanic to the save-or-sacrifice dynamic of the original. In the new incarnation, there is a third neutral option, which will increase both life and magic, as opposed to the restrictions in place before. The game will also feature a new Grimm aesthetic, focussing on fairytale creatures and locales.



"The way the game treated [the characters], as fully-fledged individuals, with their own hopes, desires, and anxieties, spoke to me in a way no game had before"

STEVE GAYNOR, THE FULLBRIGHT COMPANY

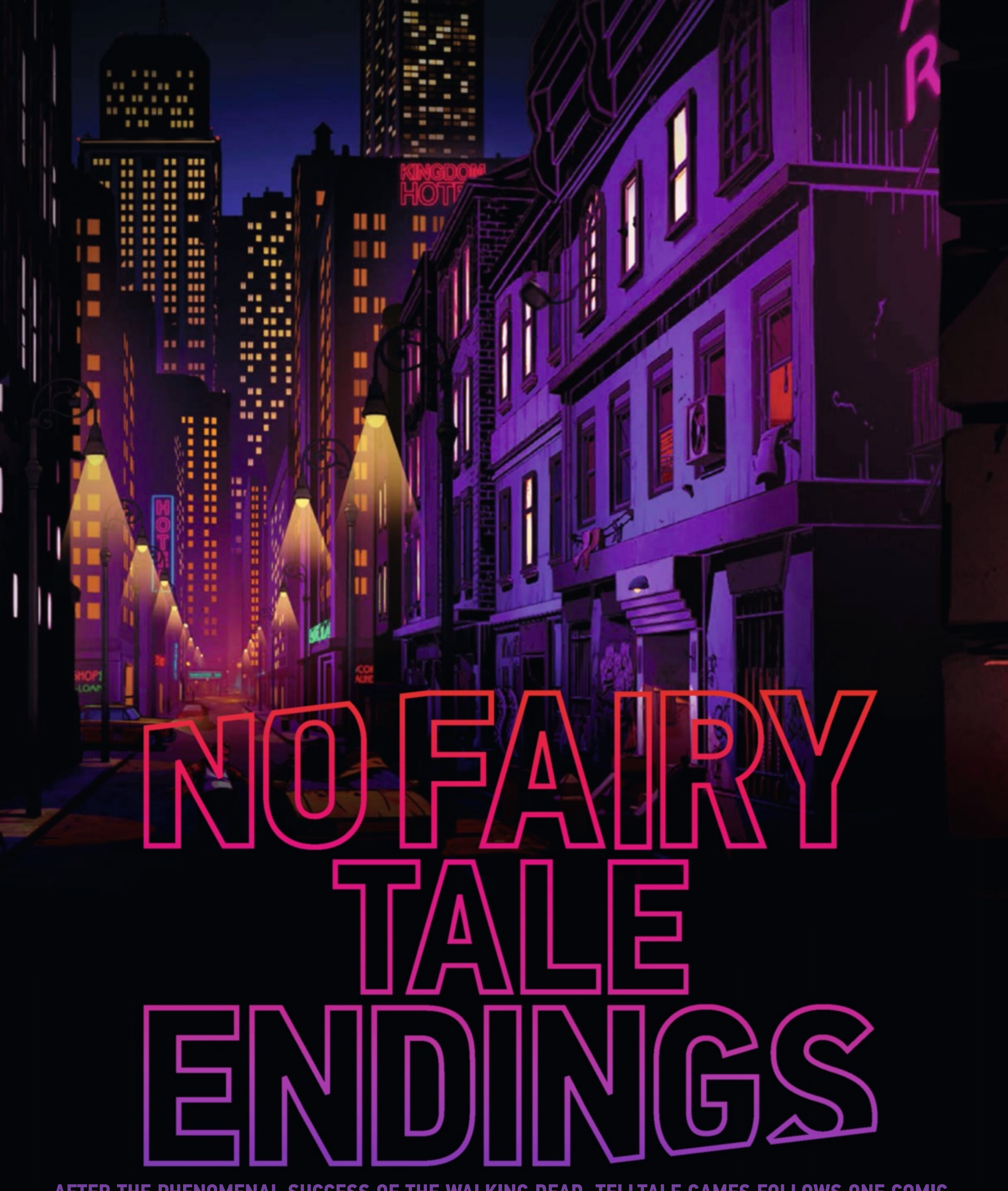


WHY I ♥...

Full Throttle

STEVE GAYNOR, CO-FOUNDER, THE FULLBRIGHT COMPANY

I'd gotten into Lucasarts adventures like Monkey Island, Day Of The Tentacle, *and* Sam & Max. *They were funny, witty, smart, slapstick pieces of entertainment. Then* Full Throttle *came out. It was still funny, and witty, and smart. And it was entertaining. But taking place of the slapstick wackiness was a melancholy, earnest emotional heart. That core of the experience was built around three people – Ben, the protagonist, Maureen, and Malcolm Corley – and their messy, complicated, constantly evolving relationships with one another. The way the game treated them, as fully-fledged individuals, with their own hopes, desires, and anxieties, spoke to me in a way no game had before, and that is still exceedingly rare to find in a game. The ending of* Full Throttle *for me still stands as the most pitch-perfect closing moment of any video game.* Full Throttle *is one of the greatest videogame love stories ever told.*



NO FAIRY TALE ENDINGS

AFTER THE PHENOMENAL SUCCESS OF THE WALKING DEAD, TELLTALE GAMES FOLLOWS ONE COMIC BOOK ADAPTATION WITH ANOTHER: THE WOLF AMONG US, BASED ON BILL WILLINGHAM'S FABLES SERIES. TALKING WITH THE STUDIO, GAMES™ VENTURES INTO THE DARK FAIRY TALE WORLD OF BEASTS, MAGIC AND MYTH TO DISCOVER THAT TELLTALE HAS LOST NONE OF ITS BITE



Running a studio is all about making the right choices – just look at Telltale Games. After years spent in relative obscurity, the graphic adventure company recently rose to prominence after racking up a series of high-profile titles that capitalised on both cherished and zeitgeist-y licensed properties. It more-or-less delivered the *Back To The Future* sequel that every Eighties-born cinephile has demanded for three decades, and followed that up by busting open the gates to *Jurassic Park*, unleashing its terrors on unsuspecting gamers (and we're not talking about the prehistoric wildlife). However, it wasn't until it adapted Robert Kirkman's *The Walking Dead* comic series, having recently been turned into a US serial drama, that the studio truly found itself riding the crest of a global pop culture phenomenon and enjoyed a long-overdue critical and commercial success.

> "IT DOES A GREAT JOB OF SHOWING THE SEX, GRIT AND BLOOD THAT IS GOING ON BEHIND THESE FAIRY TALES"

» These astute choices were symptomatic of the developer's upward trajectory, collaborating on commercial brands to ensure its games would grip a broad audience. Which is why Telltale's next major franchise appointment, *The Wolf Among Us*, is so fascinating, appearing to be a decision directed completely in the contrary. "We're just drawn to really incredible stories," Telltale Games president and co-founder Kevin Bruner coolly explains why the studio chose to adapt Bill Willingham's *Fables* comic book series. "Sometimes those stories are giant cultural products, sometimes they're more modest than that."

The truth is *Fables* is more than just a modest success. The Vertigo comic series was first published in 2002 and is still ongoing (there have been 133 issues to date, and various spin-off publications), and while its sales can't be compared to the astronomical fortunes of *The Walking Dead*, it's a hip, compelling read that rightfully earned cult status and a place among Vertigo's most popular serials. Yet, it's easy to see why it hasn't quite penetrated the public consciousness, with its mishmash of pulpy storylines, adult themes and characters plucked from fairy tale lore (Snow White, the three little pigs and The Big Bad Wolf are major players), all set against a backdrop of a clandestine community buried in modern day New York City.

"One of the things at the core we're looking for is a really interesting world, a great cast and really good writing. When we looked at *Fables* we certainly found those things," Bruner tells **games™**. "The *Fables* comics are vast – there are hundreds of issues. The characters are really well developed and super interesting, and just the general premise of these darker fairy tale characters, whose real lives are very different from the fairy tales that they're in. It seemed like really good fodder for us."

"I think that the stories we tend to be attracted to are the ones that ask 'What if?'" adds director of design Ryan Kaufman. "What if this happened, what would you do in this character's shoes? And *Fables* has that kind of drama in spades." The journey has already begun. The first episode of the bi-monthly series arrived at the tail-end of October, introducing Bigby Wolf, the sheriff of Fabletown – rehabilitated from the days when he stalked young girls as the Big Bad Wolf – tasked with protecting his fantasy peers exiled from their Homeland. Set before Willingham's series, *The Wolf Among Us* introduces Bigby amid a bust-up in Fabletown with The Woodsman – of *Little Red Riding Hood* fame – which kicks off a series of events that launches the hard-boiled sheriff into a murderous investigation.

The decision to set the story before the events of the comics proved doubly beneficial, offering newcomers an easy entryway while also enabling Telltale to tell its own story and remain canonical without getting tangled in the mythology. "We had a lot of *Fables* fans at the studios, a lot of people who were starting from deep inside the books and stories, so we mostly looked to them working from the inside out," says Bruner. "But there were some people very new to *Fables*, and it was good for those to get to know the stories as well, but we had a lot of people who were already diehard fans."

"I think that adapting it to a game, we asked ourselves 'Who are the characters that give the player the most agency? Who are the characters that have the most influence on the world, the most proactive?'" interjects Kaufman. "It was pretty natural when we were thinking about what we do, how we offer value to players, their ability to craft the character to an extent and craft the story. It felt like a prequel was a natural, organic fit. We read a lot of issues of stuff that came after that an it was really engaging and compelling, but we always talked about it like 'How did it lead up to that?'"

Certainly one of the reasons that Telltale has risen in popularity over the last few years is due to its approach to each of its franchise





■ Below: *The Wolf Among Us* delves into the origins of some of *Fables*' key relationships, and reveals a few surprises about the series' characters.



adaptations. *The Walking Dead* wasn't a rerun of Frank Grimes' most memorable days surviving the apocalypse; it was its own story, with its own cast that occasionally interweaved with existing events within the comic book. While *The Wolf Among Us* does feature many of the principal players from Willingham's series, there has been a focus on introducing its own characters, enabling the studio to once again meddle with expectations and coax the player into making the type of ruthless choices with shattering consequences that reduce grown adults to gibbering wrecks.

"[*The Walking Dead*] taught us a lot about what an effective choice moment was," says Kaufman. "We had some early ones that were tipped 90/10 with people overwhelmingly picking one choice, but we prefer a closer 50/50 split. It means that you really had to think about it and that's the thing that people come away from remembering, those 50/50 decisions where it's just not clear what to do. When we looked at *Wolf*, we'd sit there and debate a choice moment and we really had to be sure in the room that we were feeling that the decision could go either way. That gave us more confidence, making better choices. If they were more weighted and obvious then we would tend to redo them and add more complexity. We want people to tell their own stories."

Bruner agrees: "We don't want to retell stories. Our game has new characters that are not in the books, but it's still about Bigby and Snow White and the cast that you know. I think we're pretty comfortable creating whole new aspects of the world or diving in with characters you know. For this we kind of did this hybrid approach. [We can] explore how Snow becomes who she becomes and what motivates the starting line for the characters in the trade." It also helped that the series' creator, Bill Willingham, was onboard from the beginning, offering his input into how Telltale can drive the prequel (set 20 years before *Fables*) towards the events within the books without stymieing the studio's creative impulses.

"We definitely wanted to keep it canonical," says Kaufman. "We talked to Bill a lot and he was absolutely fantastic to work with. He gave us advice but also gave us a lot of freedom. He looked at our outlines. He encouraged us to take stories in slightly different directions sometimes because he felt like »



■ Inset: Bigby can visit the business office to find out Fabletown secrets.

WHAT'S HAPPENING WITH THE WALKING DEAD SEASON 2?

■ During our conversation with Telltale, it was impossible not to talk about how *The Walking Dead* influenced *The Wolf Among Us*. However, towards the end of our time with the studio, we asked what elements of *The Wolf Among Us* might we see in the second season of *The Walking Dead*, due 2014. "I think a lot of what we've learnt about the combat stuff will show up in season two," Ryan Kaufman, director of design on *The Wolf Among Us*, cagily reveals. "In general, I think a lot of the choice and narrative moments we've continued to refine. They've been working on it too as well: *400 Days* was a really cool experiment in multiple perspective storytelling and whittling down choice moments to the finest tooth pick of a decision that still had a bite. The whole studio has really been getting their heads around what it is to craft a compelling narrative for players to interact with."

MEET THE FABLES

DIRECTOR OF DESIGN RYAN KAUFMAN'S GUIDE TO THE PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS OF THE WOLF AMONG US...



BIGBY WOLF

■ He used to be a villain. He was the murderer and tormentor of the Fables back when they were in the Homeland. After they came here he became their protector. You can imagine the problems this causes and bad feelings that exist between him and the people who remember what he was. Part of the deal of this new life they have is that they're all supposed to forget and forgive, which is fine on the surface, but there's a lot of resentment.



SNOW WHITE

■ Right now Snow White is the assistant deputy mayor. She goes on to do bigger and better things but at this point she's still trying to figure it out. But she, throughout the course of the season, is going to come into her own. And we know from before that if you go into her backstory she's perfectly capable of taking care of herself. She's an interesting and complex character and acts as a nice counterbalance to Bigby.



ICHABOD CRANE

■ He's this kind of school teacher. He is the deputy mayor of Fabletown. The mayor is King Cole but he's never around, so it's left to Crane to run things. He looks down his nose at a lot of people; he may or may not be up to some shifty stuff... For the most part he's just the schoolmaster – the one you hate. Hard to deal with but he's in charge, so what are you gonna do? You have to deal with him.



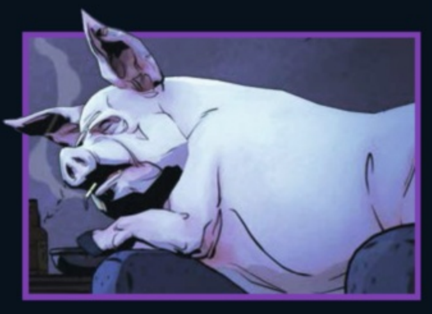
MR TOAD

■ He's a slumlord, basically. His star has fallen a bit. He's a really funny character, he's one of the characters you can laugh with and laugh at, and he's got this little kid. His dealings with Bigby are centred around the fact he still looks like a frog and that's not cool – he can't walk around New York looking like that. So they have an ongoing debate about what he's going to do about that.



BUMFKIN

■ He's there in the business office and helps you research things. As the sheriff investigating a murder, you can imagine him being very useful and he knows a lot of things. He can't leave the business office, so he can't get out and about and come around with you. But what he can do is help you understand a lot of the backstory. He does that for Bigby but he also does that for the player.



THREE LITTLE PIGS (COLIN)

■ Colin is a great character because he's the only one who can speak truth to Bigby. Bigby owes him for the whole 'Blowing down the houses' bit and he totally milks the guilt on that one. The scenes between them are hilarious and he has this angle on Bigby that he never lets up on. Colin can explain why people don't like you in a way that doesn't seem like he's lecturing you, he's just shooting the shit.

» that's part of storytelling tradition. I remember him saying that, to him, stories have different perspectives and they get changed in the retelling and that's very much a part of storytelling tradition and very much part of *Fables*. That was great to hear and allowed us to use that freedom, while at the same time respect what he's done, what he's set down in the canon, characters and stories."

Talking dogs and rabbits, rampaging dinosaurs, flesh-munching corpses and time-travelling teenagers – *The Wolf Among Us*' eclectic cast sits quite comfortably alongside the stars of previous Telltale titles. But while all of them had a high-concept hook to net gamers into their narrative, none quite resonated like *The Walking Dead*. The relationship between fugitive Lee and estranged little girl Clementine gave the drama heart as well as bite.

"WHEN I LOOK AT WHAT'S TO COME IN WOLF, IT SEEMS LIKE THE NEXT LOGICAL STEP IN THE TELLTALE EXPERIENCE"

"It was a lot to do with how we connect people to the stories we're telling and give them influence, ownership and investment and feeling in the things that are happening," says Kaufman of the response to *The Walking Dead*'s central pairing. "A lot of that did go back into *Wolf*. What we did learn from *The Walking Dead* was what people enjoyed about that game, what made them cry, what made them connect with it. Looking at *Wolf* and making sure we were doing a good job there too. It's not the same type of game but it's going to feel really familiar in those ways." Having co-founded the company in 2004, Bruner views the increased emotional engagement as part of Telltale's evolution as a studio, and points ahead at the ensuing chapters of *The Wolf Among Us* as where players will see that level of immersion and investment magnified.

"We've been dedicating ourselves to telling these stories in this interactive game way for a long time and if you look

over our history we've gotten better at that with each game as we've figured out more compelling ways to give you more control in stories," he tells us. "Making sure those stories matter and hit the player emotionally, and when I look at what's to come in *Wolf*, it seems like the next logical step in the Telltale experience."

It's not just a steady progression in storytelling, either; visually, *The Wolf Among Us* steps up the quality of art direction. Saturating the screen in muted neon shades, it not only emulates the quirks of the source material – any screenshot could double as a panel from the comic – but animation has been greatly improved, displaying fewer static movements and gestures. It was remaining authentic to the source material that spurred Telltale's approach to the visuals.

"We had a piece of art from the books that was Bigby in his office…or that might've been one of our artists drawing in the style of the books," recalls Bruner. "It was this very iconic image - it looked like it could've been lifted from any panel in the book – and we had a giant picture of it and pinned it to the wall and said 'That's what we're making.' We just planted our flag very early that this game was going to look as much like a comic book as it could. It involved some new technology, some new art production practices; the art department worked with the programmers really closely to get there. It's not really toon-shaded; it's comic-shaded. It doesn't come across like a gimmick, it comes off as the right thing to do, this living comic book feel. We're striving to make our animation higher fidelity, more fluid and look better. We produce an enormous amount of content really fast, that's just one of the things we're always trying to up our game on."

Particularly in the action stakes it would appear. In the opening chapter alone, Bigby tussles with his nemesis in a series of reflex-stressing prompts and gestures, giving players greater choice in the direction of combat. While *The Walking Dead* was no slouch in the tension department, it was more of a case of either surviving or clumsily navigating around its more extensive action beats.

"Bigby is just a badass. He's really strong; a physically able character, unlike Lee who was mostly reacting to things," admits Kaufman. "So we changed up the combat mechanics a bit to allow players to drive the fight a little bit more and feel that physical power that Bigby has, so you can craft the fight the way that you want. That's an improvement. It's kind of this stream of interaction. Sometimes you'll get a QTE and then you'll get a really quick decision that you can make that'll actually effect the fight going forward and it's all this flurry of interactivity where we blend a lot of what we've learned about choices, QTEs and generally good types of gameplay into a new fight mechanic."



Inset: Fairy tale creatures must use magic known as Glamour to take on human form and blend in with society. If they don't, then they're shipped off with other uncooperative creatures.

"WE'RE JUST DRAWN TO REALLY INCREDIBLE STORIES. SOMETIMES THOSE STORIES ARE GIANT CULTURAL PRODUCTS, SOMETIMES THEY'RE MORE MODEST THAN THAT"

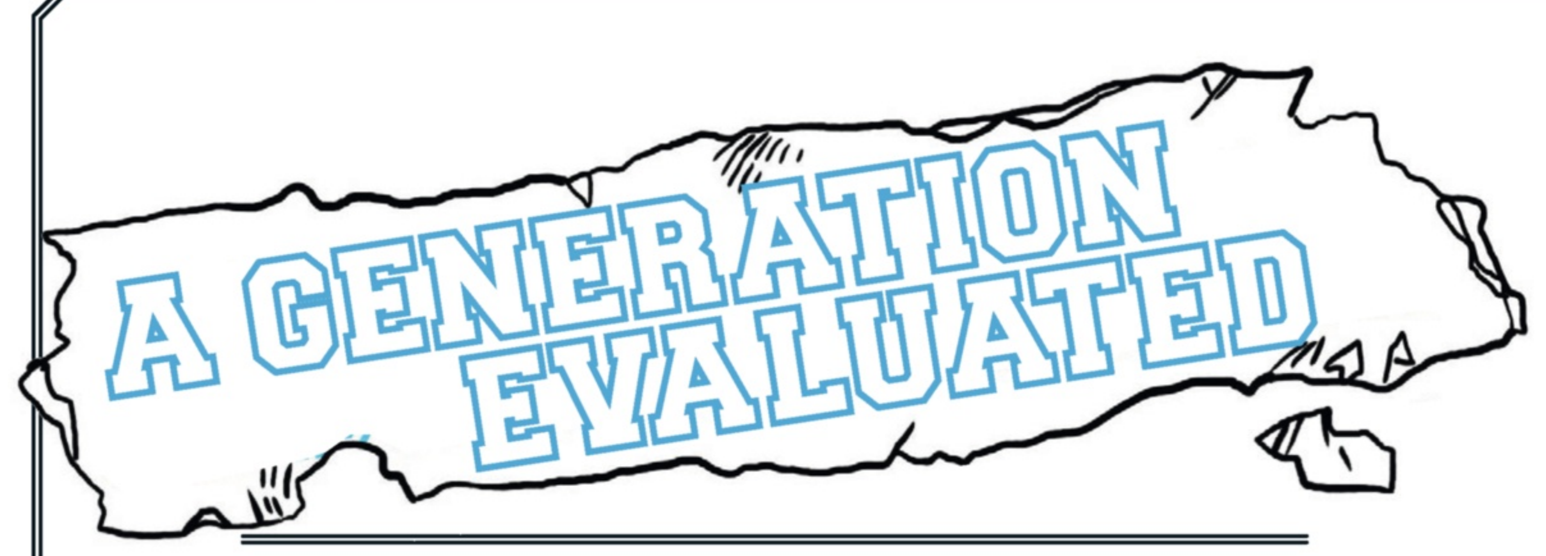
We ask how the technology has evolved, whether the studio has employed motion-capture and facial scanning to bring a range of emotional nuance to the characters. "We wanted to go with all hand animated, key frame animation because it gave us this more stylised look we wanted," explains Kaufman, noting that the studio explored such technology in the past. "From our experience, motion capture is more of a stylistic, artistic decision than a technical, or cost-based one… the way we used doesn't make anything faster or cheaper, it just makes things different. It's a tonal thing for us." "We tried gluing a bunch of ping-pong balls to someone's German Shepherd," adds Bruner. "It didn't quite work for us."

Despite the studio's past success in casting the lead roles in its adventures, Telltale went through the wringer as it searched for *The Wolf Among Us*' Bigby. "I think this game was very difficult," says Bruner. "We spent a lot of time casting, but this was probably one of the hardest games that we've ever cast. We looked at some very big name actors, local, Telltale players and it was a really challenging task. Bigby is a very challenging character but in the end Adam Harrington – who plays Bigby – he really invested the time, really made the character his own and really got into what we were trying to do. That really made the difference. He became Bigby. He spent a lot of time in the studio with us, spent a lot of time here at the development studio, hanging out with the developers – more than any other actor has for a project that we've worked on. That's the secret ingredient that makes Bigby work so well."

After **games™** finishes talking to Bruner and Kaufman, they're straight back to polishing the second part of the series at the California-based studio. But the word is in, and the first instalment, *Faith*, has met near-universal praise, confirming that the studio has lost none of its pedigree as trailblazers in interactive storytelling. "The opening moments of the game really grounds those characters with some real problems," Kaufman says of *Faith*'s success. "It feels very human and we keep that going through the series. It does a great job of showing the sex, grit and blood that is going on behind these fairy tales. Sure, this is the Big Bad Wolf, but he has a job to do and it's not fun and the dilemmas that he faces feel good and real and those choices will be hard to make."



Inset: Having put the past behind him, Bigby's temperament often gets the better of him and the Big Bad Wolf will come out to play.



WITH THE ERA OF 360, PS3 AND WII DRAWING TO A CLOSE, WE PICK OUT THE WINNERS AND LOSERS OF AN AGGRESSIVE EIGHT YEAR CONSOLE WAR

ILLUSTRATIONS: **KEVIN SCULLY**

This feature will evaluate the current console generation as it transitions into a new phase, highlighting notable accomplishments, minor indiscretions and what we might be able to learn about the future from the past eight years. This will take into account Microsoft, Nintendo and Sony's contributions to the culture of gaming, alongside the efforts of their contemporaries over the past several years, while also drawing attention to prominent events that assisted in either defining the entirety of the era, or just made us laugh a bit.

We have condensed an extensive catalogue of noteworthy events into six pages of informative, constructive and critical analysis of the last eight years that will, in all likelihood, be flagrantly ignored as we venture into another generation of highs and lows, discomfitures and triumphs, innovations and iterations, and, lest we forget, games. This was the arrival of the connected age. So what did we learn?

Most Popular

Heading Towards A Breakdown

The Late Success



CONSOLE LAUNCH

A look at how Microsoft, Sony and Nintendo performed at the start of their respective product launches, the manner in which they promoted their hardware and how the formative days of each console was perceived by the general public

THE XBOX 360 LAUNCH

■ A successful start to the generation, although issues with supply/demand affected early adoption rates in certain regions – consumers in European countries in particular struggled to get their hands on consoles at launch (although this was remedied by the Christmas period, with Microsoft shipping over 6 million units in the region by then). Hitting the shelves with 18 playable games, Microsoft gave next-gen-hungry players the opportunity to get a varied and satisfying taste of what this generation could offer – from racing games to sports titles and FPSs to RPGs*. Despite rumours that production on the launch titles was rushed so they could be ready for the Xbox 360's street date, the general reception seemed to be overwhelmingly positive.

*In Japan, the console only launched with seven titles, perhaps one reason why the Xbox 360 never really found a devoted audience on Eastern shores

THE PLAYSTATION 3 LAUNCH

■ Launching in NTSC regions almost a year after the seventh generation had begun, Sony's successful launch took a bad turn by further delays to PAL regions – with a shortage of components for the system's Blu-ray drives cited as the main issue. When the PlayStation 3 finally dropped, many analysts and consumers criticised Sony's pricing structure, claiming that the hardware was not worth the asking price of £425/$599 (despite the console's built-in Blu-ray player, the inclusion of which is a credit to Sony's forward thinking).

The initial offering of PlayStation 3 launch titles was slim, with Sony's first-party exclusives failing to excite audiences as much as Microsoft's had a year earlier. Sony had a fairly flat start to the generation, and a mixture of bad logistics and marketing decisions led many consumers to switch from PlayStation to Xbox – at least at the start of the generation. Despite a record-breaking launch in Europe, it would not catch Xbox 360 for years.

KEN KUTARAGI'S 'MORE HOURS' DECLARATION

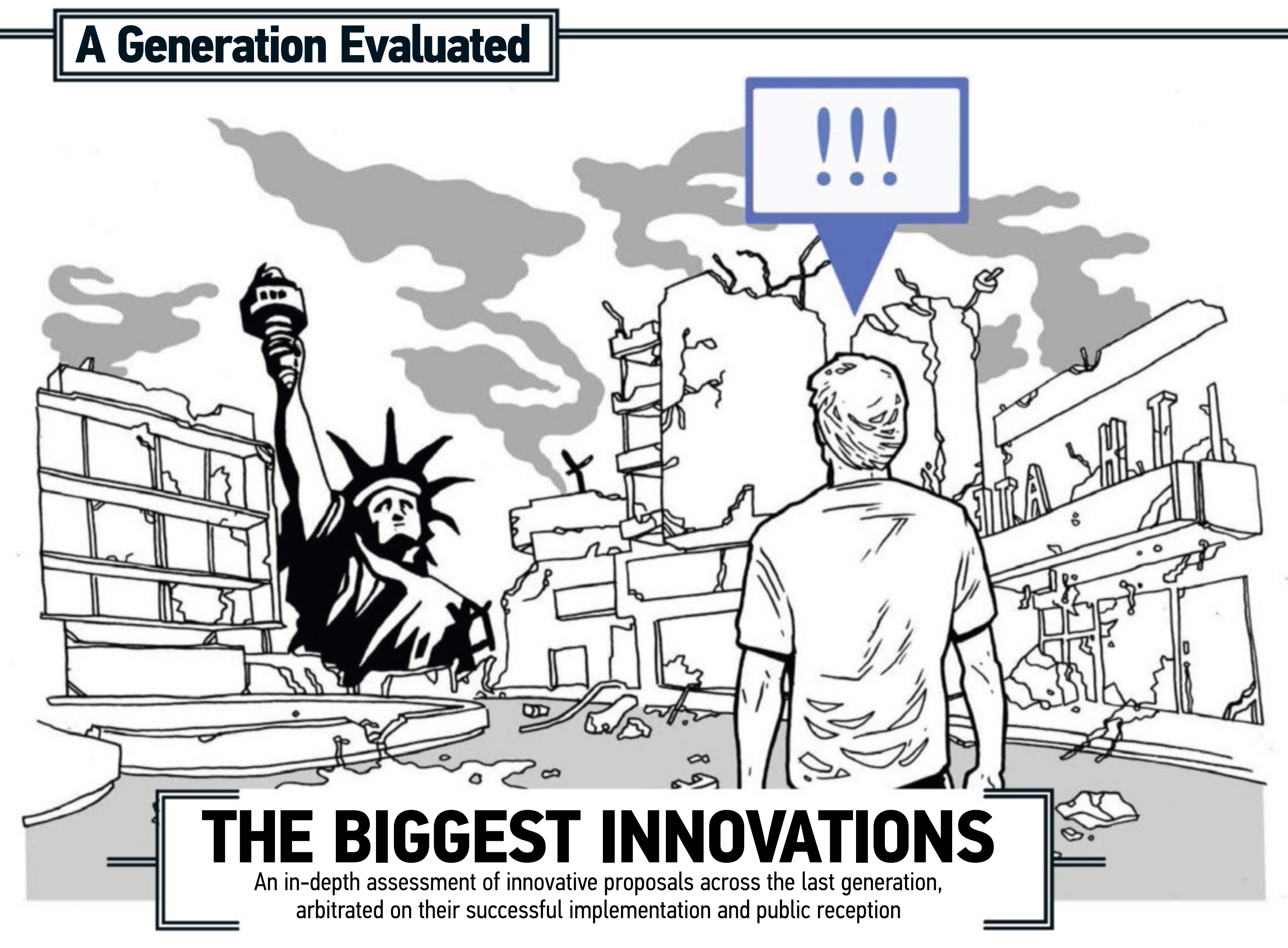
■ Ken Kutaragi oversaw the launch of the original PlayStation, the PS2, PS3 and PSP, and over his four big console launches, seemed to get *better* at making gaffes. The most notable? When publicising the PS3 he claimed: "We want consumers to think to themselves 'I will work more hours to buy one'." Please be more cautious with your wording in future, Ken.

NINTENDO DS/ PSP LAUNCH

■ Arguably the most successful launches of this generation, Nintendo and Sony's handhelds surprised us with how insanely popular they were, straight from launch. Knowing their market unlike any other console (the DS in particular), both handhelds understood their core audience – though it took the PSP a while to get going, by 2008 it was a great console with a strong library.

THE RE-INTRODUCTION OF XBOX LIVE

■ Xbox Live had been introduced in the Xbox/ PlayStation 2 era, but the 360 was the first console launched to be built specifically to take advantage of a broadband connection. This opened up services we take for granted now, years down the line – downloadable games, video streaming services, online options for console games... Microsoft was the first on the scene in terms of console connectivity, and everything it introduced, it did *right*.



THE BIGGEST INNOVATIONS

An in-depth assessment of innovative proposals across the last generation, arbitrated on their successful implementation and public reception

THE BOOM AND BUST OF PERIPHERAL GAMING

■ The last generation not only demonstrated publishers' knack for splurging inordinate amounts of cash to their detriment, but the public showed a similarly frivolous attitude to spending when it came to peripheral-based games. *Guitar Hero* led the vanguard with its palatable mix of anthems and simple-to-use guitar accessory, but it'd soon be eclipsed by an expanded assortment of plastic replications of instruments that failed to innovate alongside a price tag that continued to escalate. It was an empire that crumbled with the arrival of *DJ Hero*; the niche product that – while excellent – stalled the market both creatively and commercially, proving the fad was over.

THE PROLIFERATION OF MOTION CONTROL

■ Nintendo's greatest contribution to the last generation was the advent of motion controls, inviting simplistic, intuitive gameplay into the living room and coining the term 'casual gamer' – a contentious phrase that would reverberate across the industry. But while the Wii's gameplay aspirations felt relatively reserved, Sony and Microsoft's attempts to muscle in on the territory respectively with Move and Kinect demonstrated both parties having a reach that far exceeded their grasp. Outside of first-party studios and interminable party titles, few developers sought to shoehorn motion controls into their products, and on the few occasions where it did it creep into a title it felt marginalised and fallow.

NOBODY'S (PLAYSTATION) HOME

■ Talked up largely by Phil Harrison prior to launch, PlayStation Home promised a community hub where users could socialise before jumping into games. What we got was endless loading screens and clusters of idiots dancing on the spot. After the PlayStation 3's rocky launch, it only exacerbated Sony's woes.

REACH FOR THE SKY

■ One of the surprise success stories of the generation, *Skylanders* ingeniously utilised near-field technology to fuse the toy market and videogames aimed at a pre-teen demographic. In much the same way as *Pokémon*, it fused collecting and swapping with RPG tropes to form an irresistible prospect, one that would net Activision over 30 million in worldwide sales.

MOBILE GAMING TAKES OVER

■ As mobile technology continued to advance through numerous iterations, developers turned their attention to phones and tablets to make accessible experiences marketed at an audience that far surpassed the reach of console hardware. The result was a surge of creativity and sales in touch-screen software that propelled unknown developers into worldwide prominence, snatching the mobile marketplace from Nintendo and Sony.

MULTIMEDIA CONSOLE CAPABILITIES

■ During the last generation, the focus of the hardware began to drift away from housing a robust gaming platform and towards offering a multimedia hub. Streaming television services, downloadable music, films and television, and popular apps became instrumental in asserting Sony, Microsoft and Nintendo's hardware as multifunctional devices that not only offered a broader appeal to consumers, but left little reason to own any other entertainment devices.

THE GENERATION'S EVOLUTION

Reviewing areas of aptitude, excellence and growth during the length of the console cycle, and how these contributions enabled progression within the industry

THE WII'S EXPANSION INTO CASUAL GAMING

■ One of this generation's biggest achievements with regards to audience growth was the rapid expansion into the casual market. This was accelerated by the launch of the Wii – a console that was designed to be family-friendly and accessible; ultimately proving to be this generation's most unexpected success.

Hardcore titles on the Wii would falter. Looking at Metroid: Other M, for example, it reviewed well and sold poorly while weaker casual titles continued to thrive in the market. The Wii's lifespan summed up.

SONY TURNS ITS FORTUNES WITH EXCLUSIVES

■ After stumbling out the starting block, the PlayStation 3's fortunes changed with the release of *Uncharted 2*. It marked the start of Sony's platform-exclusive domination, with Naughty Dog, Quantic Dream, Studio Santa Monica and a slew of others all rallying around the hardware. The mid-generation shift of superiority enabled Sony to redouble its efforts in forming exclusive partnerships with developers and publishers.

THE BIRTH OF THE MEGA-FRANCHISE

■ This generation saw the meteoric rise of *Assassin's Creed, Battlefield, Call Of Duty* and *Guitar Hero*, among many more. The mega-franchise was born this generation, and with it came the often-lambasted yearly release, the lazy spinoff, the saturation of franchises and ideas. The mega-franchise wouldn't exist if there wasn't a call for it, but publishers, safe in the knowledge that they can ease out a release every year and rest on their laurels, often unintentionally ruin their IP. The momentum gathered in the build-up to this acclaim can galvanise a series' place in the gaming market – *Call Of Duty, Assassin's Creed* and *Battlefield* are examples of this – but weaker IP cannot sustain the persistent strain: casualties of this generation are the likes of the *Tony Hawk* franchise or *Guitar Hero*.



● Microsoft's Xbox Live platform has hosted some of the generation's best downloadable indie titles, including the record-breaking *Minecraft*.

GAMES BECOME BIGGER THAN FILMS

■ Peaking recently with *Grand Theft Auto V* – which hit the $1 billion sales benchmark quicker than any other entertainment product – the games industry has proved that it's a profitable place to be this generation. The rise of F2P has given publishers a chance to extract more profit from their games, and at the height of their success the best MMOs were pulling in millions a month. It's no surprise that the medium overtook the film industry as the biggest earner in entertainment, with annual *Call Of Duty* entries raking in more cash than *Avatar* and *The Dark Knight*. Not necessarily something to boast about, but nonetheless culturally significant.

THE RISE OF INDIE DEVELOPMENT

■ Storming onto consoles, and no doubt helped by cult films like *Indie Game: The Movie*, indie developers have achieved something of a rock star status among gamers this generation – Mike Bithell, Edmund McMillen and Phil Fish are just a few indie developers that have risen to the top of the pile with their innovative projects and outspoken games design. Despite developers airing issues with Microsoft regarding their closed-door policies to indies, both Xbox Indie Games and PSN offered consumers a wide range of titles developed by a wide range of creators, and have laid the foundations for the indie backbone that the next generation seems to be relying on right now. »

"The mega-franchise was born this generation, and with it came the often-lambasted yearly release and the lazy spin-off"

DEALING WITH CONTROVERSY

How developers, publishers and individuals interacted with one another in regard to collaboration and responding to criticism (both constructive and otherwise)

JACK THOMPSON AND GRAND THEFT AUTO

■ "The gravest assault upon children in this country since polio," said outspoken Florida lawyer Jack Thompson of *Grand Theft Auto IV*. Thompson was disbarred in 2008. "Losing a law licence is a very small price to pay to stand against this evil," he told Gamezone this year upon the release of *Grand Theft Auto V*.

THE AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ENTITLEMENT

■ The relationship between developers and gamers was drastically altered over the course of the last hardware cycle as voices from the community grew to a deafening hum. The most troubling result of this was how developers reacted; BioWare tweaked the ending of *Mass Effect 3* at the request of its fanbase, implying a lack of creative integrity in its original vision. As long as vociferous gamers continue to express themselves always expecting to be heard, then creative process is doomed, destined to be designed by committee rather than individuals.

Do people really know what is good for them? The fans are not always right.

THE DEATH OF THIRD-PARTY EXCLUSIVES

■ It seems over the last few years that the major franchise third-party publisher exclusive has come to an abrupt halt. The days of *Ridge Racer*, *Final Fantasy* and *Metal Gear Solid* all debuting solely on one platform has become an increasing rarity, no doubt due to both the evenly split marketplace and the inflated development costs. It's arguable whether this is a good thing for consumers or not: on the one hand it equates to more variety, while spurring first-party developers to reach higher standards; on the other, it offers little to separate competing hardware. With the popularity of DLC exclusivity deals, don't expect big brands to swear allegiance to one manufacturer ever again. The last of this generation's big exclusive hitters was *Metal Gear Solid 4*, and rumours of that game going to Xbox 360 were persistent throughout the two or three years following release. While it never did, *Metal Gear Rising*'s release on Xbox 360 was a real sign of the times when it came to the death of this phenomenon.



● Although its sequels were great, *Assassin's Creed* was one of the biggest disappointments of this generation.



DEVELOPMENT: MISTAKES MADE

Some ideas this generation simply did not work out, whether we're talking about bad business decisions or creative disappointments. Here were some lowlights...

THE UPS AND DOWNS OF DLC

■ The last few years have seen downloadable content transform from an occasional bonus to a necessity in publishers' eyes, with all the major releases turning to incremental content drops to maintain interest long after the boxed product has left the shelf. Map packs, bonus missions and new characters have mostly been positively received, yet DLC malpractice has been rife – most succinctly summed up by the term 'Horse Armour' – offering little in the way of content (often found buried on the disc in the first place) for a costly sum.

To be fair, publishers seem to have reacted quickly to the negative reaction – arbitrary downloads are less common – however the stigma attached to downloadable content remains common.

THE DEATH OF STUDIOS AND PUBLISHERS

■ The turbulent economic climate has had tough consequences on the industry. Both publishers and developers have been forced into closure due to the increase in development costs and the marketplace becoming ever more hyper-competitive. Bizarre Creations, Hudson Entertainment, Eurocom and THQ have been some of the casualties over the past decade – whether due to poor business decisions or unfair treatment from publishers, they just couldn't sustain their business. Whatever the case, it seems for certain that the waters separating indie development and the triple-A blockbuster are rougher than ever.

Whatever happens next, stability is very important.

THE FREE-TO-PLAY BUG

■ Free-to-play has become a staple of the medium over the last few years, with microtransactions and grind-based gameplay fuelling not only mobile titles but becoming the basis for the stagnant MMO genre. Developers have wrestled with the concept, establishing what exactly users are prepared to pay for and what equates to value. The successes are well-known – social media hits like *Farmville* and *Candy Crush Saga* are two examples of how the business model can be done right. However, not every developer has managed to strike the right balance and consumers are becoming increasingly wary of hidden charges in supposed free titles. As the concept now transitions more prominently onto home consoles, it'll need the kinks ironing out before it truly dominates gaming.

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO XBOX IN JAPAN?

■ Microsoft got it wrong when it came to Japan – it tried to capitalise on the market by backing local developer Mistwalker, but its efforts never paid off. Perhaps it was because of the poor 360 launch in the region, or maybe it was because of poor marketing on Eastern shores. Mistwalker's *Blue Dragon* and *Lost Odyssey* gained some positive attention, but never enough to wrestle the majority of Japanese gamers away from the PS3.

ASSASSIN'S CREED GOT GOOD, BUT IT DID NOT START WELL

■ With one-button combat, lifelessly stale cut-scenes and some of the most repetitive gameplay we've seen in an open-world game, it's incredible that the original *Assassin's Creed* received the praise it did. We're glad the series soared to what it is today, but we'll never forgive the bloated original for its punishingly dull info-gathering missions.



A Generation Evaluated

AWARDS

The last eight years of gaming have exposed some inspired examples of game design, industry excellence and all-round good thinking. Here's what we think are the biggest achievements…

☑ **BEST DEVELOPER: Bethesda – for its consistency of vision and immense quality of product.**

☑ **BEST PUBLISHER: Rockstar – given its collaboration with several developers, Rockstar's forensic eye and unrivalled prestige remains remarkable.**

☑ **BEST CONSOLE: Xbox 360 – Microsoft's second home console mastered user functionality, delivered the exclusives and carefully evolved during the years. Shame about RROD.**

IMPROVEMENTS

There have also been some absolute blunders over the past generation; marketing disasters, hardware failures, games that are complete train-wrecks… we've listed the worse below, with hopes they'll remain an example of everything a generation *shouldn't* do:

☑ **WORST CONSOLE: Nintendo Wii – a lack of third-party support, a drought in software and a barrage of shovelware drowned the Wii's achievements.**

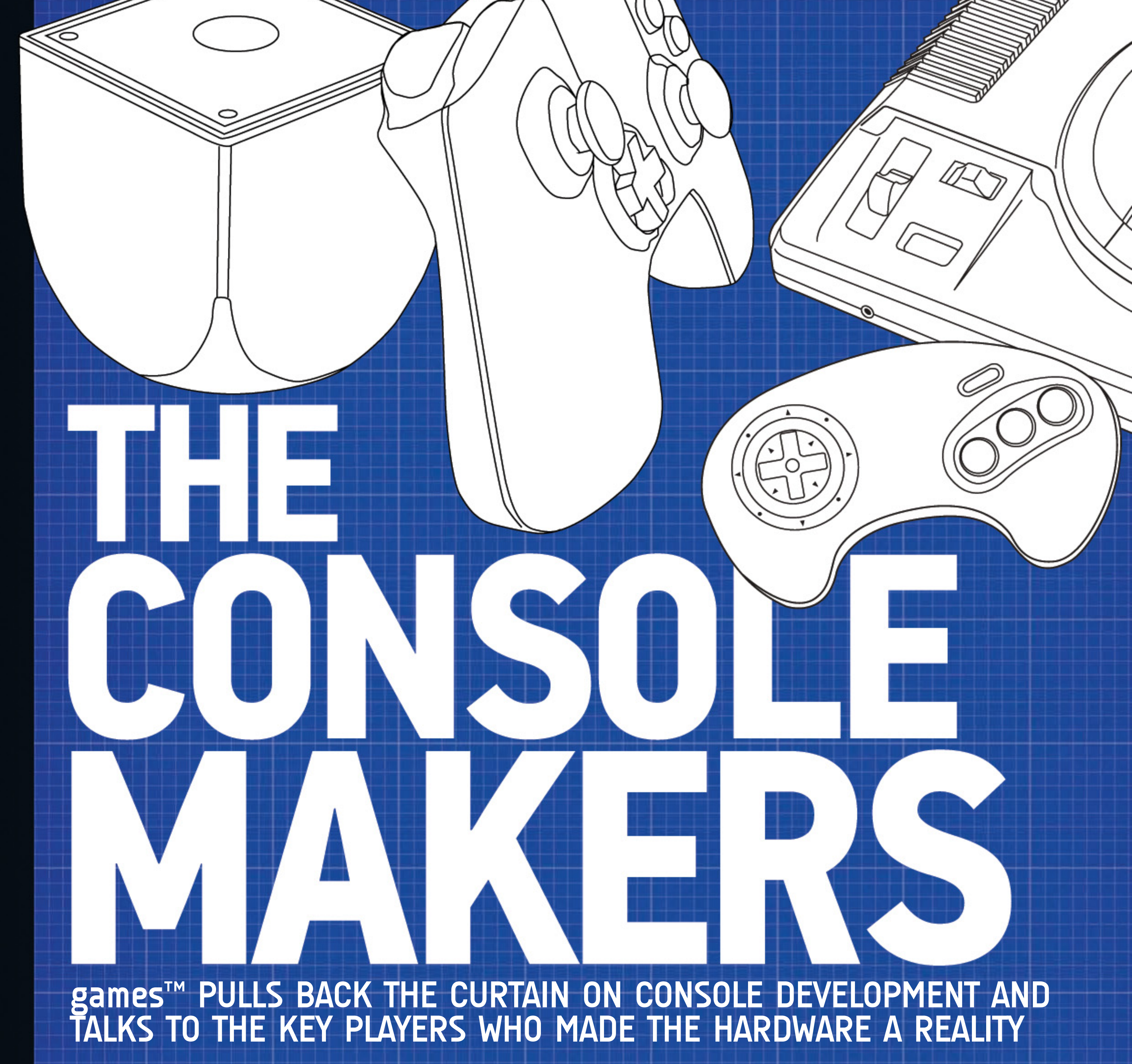
☑ **BIGGEST FAD: Rhythm action – the premium cost matched with derivative gameplay eventually spelled the end of the big budget rhythm game.**

☑ **WORST GAME: *Family Guy: Back To The Multiverse* – perhaps the most insulting example of both game design and comedy.**

CONCLUSION

A solid generation, albeit with some careless oversights – troublesome console launches, DLC hiccups and infernal motion controls – that otherwise diminish successes in other areas. Nevertheless, it's been a generation of innovation and iteration that, while often stumbling over its own accomplishments, boasts revolutionary achievements that will empower the industry for years to come. Online passes were a terrible idea.

RATING 7/10



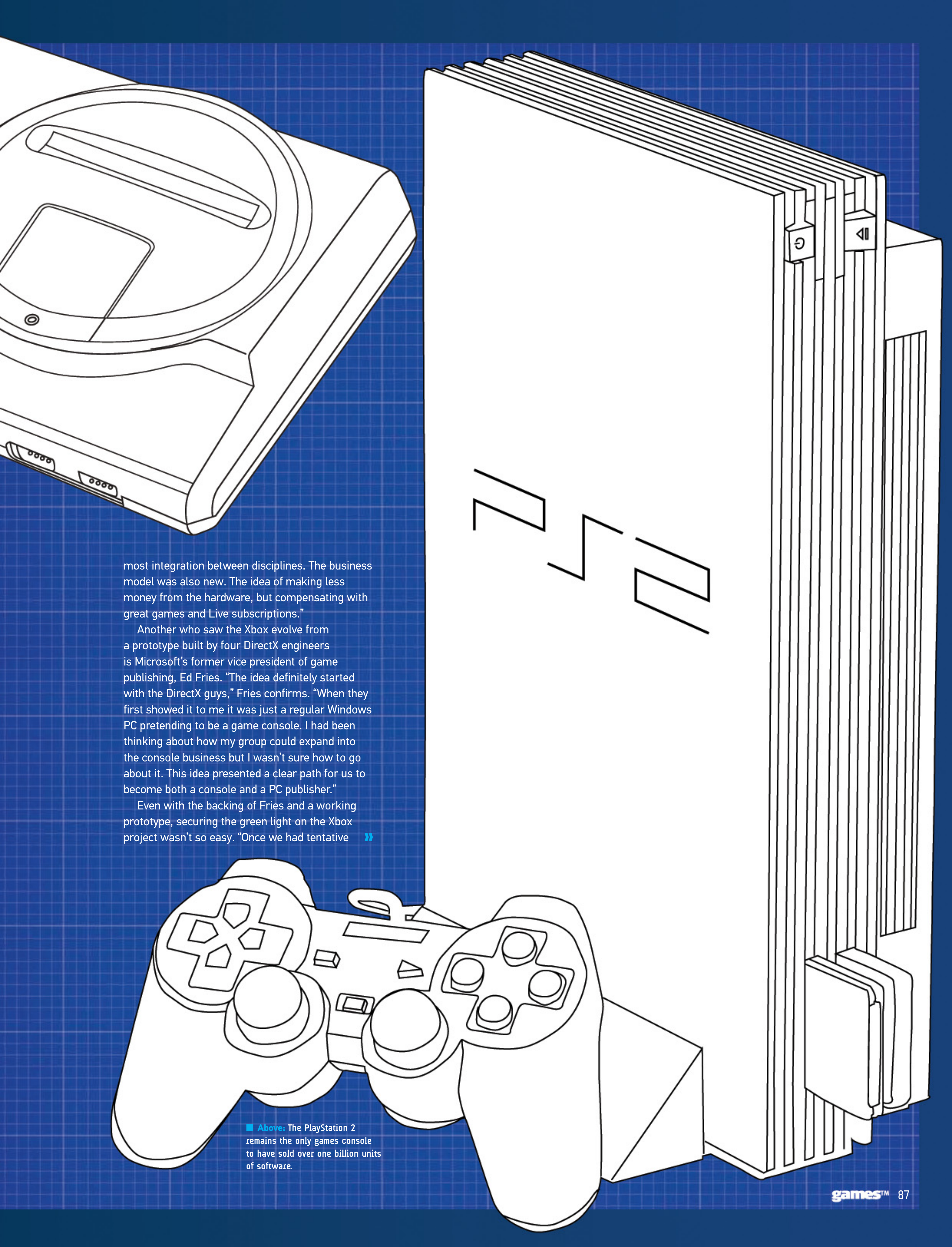
THE CONSOLE MAKERS

games™ PULLS BACK THE CURTAIN ON CONSOLE DEVELOPMENT AND TALKS TO THE KEY PLAYERS WHO MADE THE HARDWARE A REALITY

By the time this magazine hits the shelves there'll be less than a month to go before the launch of the PlayStation 4 and the Xbox One. It's been nearly eight years since the Xbox 360 ushered in the seventh console generation, and since then, the medium has continued to surprise us. While the games will always be the determining factor of a console's success, what kind of creative process goes into the hardware before final production? We speak to the console makers to find out.

"I started working at Microsoft in 1994 in the mouse group as an electrical engineer," recalls Todd Holmdahl, one of the leading hardware developers for the Xbox, Xbox 360 and Xbox One. "I helped to launch the first wheel mouse as part of this team and then later came to run the mouse group. In 1999, we launched the first optical mouse under my leadership. Shortly afterwards, I started working on Xbox and led the Xbox hardware group from 1999 to 2013. I have also worked on Kinect and various other projects in-between."

Discussing Holmdahl's creative career makes us wonder why the Xbox never featured a mouse peripheral, but instead of going off topic, we discussed how a mix of creative and corporate drives helped shape the Xbox. "Building a product means creating a set of experiences people love and having a business model that allows you to fund the development," Holmdahl explains. "For Xbox to have been successful, you need collaboration across a number of disciplines ranging from hardware to game developers. In my career, this has been the product that required the



most integration between disciplines. The business model was also new. The idea of making less money from the hardware, but compensating with great games and Live subscriptions."

Another who saw the Xbox evolve from a prototype built by four DirectX engineers is Microsoft's former vice president of game publishing, Ed Fries. "The idea definitely started with the DirectX guys," Fries confirms. "When they first showed it to me it was just a regular Windows PC pretending to be a game console. I had been thinking about how my group could expand into the console business but I wasn't sure how to go about it. This idea presented a clear path for us to become both a console and a PC publisher."

Even with the backing of Fries and a working prototype, securing the green light on the Xbox project wasn't so easy. "Once we had tentative »

■ **Above:** The PlayStation 2 remains the only games console to have sold over one billion units of software.

approval to move forward with the project, we spent about a year exploring the best way to go about it," Fries reminisces. "That culminated in a meeting with Bill Gates and Steve Ballmer to get final approval and funding. We call that meeting the Valentine's Day Massacre because it was a tough meeting and because it took place late on Valentine's Day. We all got in trouble with our partners when we finally got home."

Considering Sony's dominance at the time, only a powerhouse like Microsoft could've funded a coup d'état of this scale, and when it was finally time for round two, the workforce increased exponentially. "The original Xbox was done with a small team of about 15 in-house engineers and lots of third-party help," Holmdahl highlights. "In the 360 design, we wanted to control much more of our destiny. We had over 150 engineers and deep relationships with the chip design teams. Your design and cost structure start with your silicon and you build from that. The silicon drives your performance, thermal profile, size and cost structure."

The current generation has also seen a significant rise in the number of hardware revisions. "With our deep experience with silicon, we were able to ensure that every transistor we designed was used to create a great console experience," Holmdahl reflects. "The other big benefit was the ability to control our costs a lot more and offer a lower cost experience to the consumer when compared to the first generation. We were able to drive lots of dollars out of the console by reducing the silicon from two 90 nanometre chips at the start, to one 32 nanometre chip at the end of the console lifecycle."

Speaking with Holmdahl confirms that console development is just as complicated as it seems – if not more so. But what about the creative process that does into designing the architecture of the console itself? Understanding the exact workings behind this process would require an extensive background in hardware engineering, otherwise it's fair to say that everyone would be doing it. Even so, Holmdahl was able to offer some insight into the various stages that take place during the development cycle, and all without pulling the trigger too hard on the technical terminology.

"There are five big variables we consider," Holmdahl divulges. "These are performance, size, cost, acoustics and reliability. All of these are interrelated and key to product marketability. We worked on all and tried to make the right trade-offs that gave us the best product. We start early with a business proposal that outlines the product spec at a high level. We then complete the architecture to ensure that we can meet our specs. After that we design and prototype a number of times until we hone the product to its final version." And then it's off to the factory to produce millions.

With nearly 80 million 360's sold worldwide, it's clear that Microsoft not only hit the mark, but gained a lot of experience in the process. "We learnt a lot of lessons," Holmdahl confirms. "We hired a lot of new people in preparation for Xbox One. We put together a completely new development process that my team and I built from the ground up to make happen; to make sure we could effectively manage all the dependencies. We were able to work out key strategies early and lock them down. We maintained a tight integration with the software team so there were no surprises on either side. It felt like we got smarter each time we did this."

Understanding how Microsoft approaches console development isn't the easiest of subjects to tackle, but compared to navigating the language and cultural differences that separate a western company from the likes of Sony, Sega and Nintendo, pulling back the curtain on the Xbox is easy street. Thankfully, individuals like Dylan

Below: At least six variations of the 3DO Integrative Multiplayer are known to exist.

SIZE MATTERS

An Iwata Asks interview with Ko Shiota, Deputy General Manager of Product Development at Nintendo's Integrated Research and Development Division, offered some interesting insights into the Wii's unorthodox development



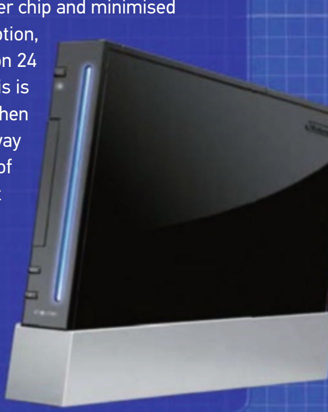
First of all, could you briefly tell us what you have been working on?
Well, I was in charge of Wii semiconductor development. Of course, Nintendo doesn't develop semiconductors by itself, so I worked on developing them with our business partners.

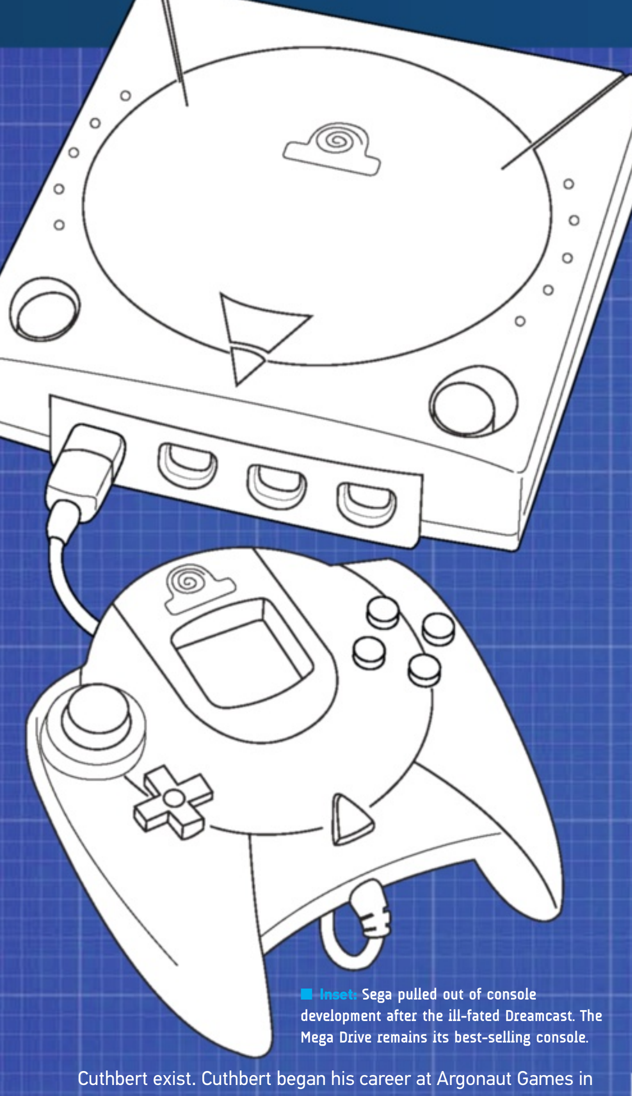
What were you originally expecting during the initial development phase, and what turned out to be different in the end result?
At the risk of oversimplifying, I would say that the technologies that form the basis of all semiconductors are not that different from each other. On the other hand, how these fundamental technologies are applied depends on the device itself. Wii takes full advantage of state-of-the-art semiconductor technologies, but its application of them differs greatly from that of other devices. So, while the fact that we are using state-of-the-art semiconductor technology does not differ from my original expectations, the way in which we are using them has turned out to be very different.

Could you be more specific?
Normally when you decide to use new semiconductor technology, you do so solely for the sake of more extravagance and higher performance. In the case of the CPU, you try to progressively improve its processing power, which in turn raises its power consumption and increases its size. Sophisticated semiconductor technology is required to realise this goal.

While you could use such cutting-edge semiconductor technology in order to facilitate this kind of extravagance, you can choose to apply this technology in other ways, such as making chips smaller. We have utilised the technology in this way so that we could minimise the power consumption of Wii. If the chip becomes smaller, we can make the size of the console smaller.

With a smaller chip and minimised power consumption, Wii can be left on 24 hours a day. This is what I meant when I said that the way Wii makes use of state-of-the-art technologies is completely different from the way in which they are used in other devices.





Inset: Sega pulled out of console development after the ill-fated Dreamcast. The Mega Drive remains its best-selling console.

Cuthbert exist. Cuthbert began his career at Argonaut Games in 1989, spent over three years working at Nintendo HQ in Japan and then founded Q-Games – developer of the *PixelJunk* series – in 2001. And if that wasn't impressive enough, he also found time to work as a lead programmer for Sony on both sides of the globe.

"I started at Sony Computer Entertainment America in 1996 before moving over to Sony Computer Entertainment Japan in 1998," Cuthbert remembers. "In the US, I wasn't involved in the PlayStation 2 at all, but I had flown to Tokyo a few times to discuss PlayStation 1 tech and knew quite a few people over there which helped ease my transition. Shu [Yoshida] was integral in giving me the job and letting me do what I had always dreamed of. That was playing and developing hardware before its release." As soon as Cuthbert arrived in Japan, he was flung headlong into early tech experiments for the PlayStation 2.

Being stationed at SCEJ during these early stages also meant that Cuthbert got to work with the preliminary PlayStation 2 prototype. "Initially it was a big green box that held only the GPU," Cuthbert shares. "We had to pretend we were programming on the Emotion Engine, when in actuality, we were programming on a PC and creating 60 frames of command lists – which is several hundred megabytes of data. We would then send this data to the green box and play it back in a

"IT WAS MARKETING, DISTRIBUTION AND SALES PEOPLE RUNNING THE SHOW; SCEA FELT LIKE A STERILE CORPORATE ENVIRONMENT WHILE I WAS THERE. NERF GUNS DON'T FIX THAT"



Above: Microsoft seems determined to make Kinect a cornerstone of its new console. Ultimately, it's up to the developers to prove its worth.



Above: The PlayStation 4 may be packed with the more capable DDR5 RAM but will that be a deciding factor in its ultimate success?

loop with no interaction. This helped us develop the math first. We couldn't even develop a game at that point because there was no controller."

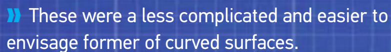
Holmdahl and Fries made clear that the Xbox began life as a creative spark before the inevitable corporate drive pushed things forward. After all, there's no point in making a console that won't sell in high number. But as Cuthbert described his experience at SCEJ, there was no mention of a Valentine's Day meeting. "At that point in time, I didn't feel any corporate pressure," Cuthbert assures us. "I felt a lot more at SCEA that it was primarily marketing, distribution and sales people running the main show; SCEA felt very much like a sterile corporate environment while I was there. Nerf guns don't fix that."

The PlayStation 2 wasn't the most powerful home console of its generation but that didn't stop it from becoming the best-selling console of all-time – a record that, despite fierce competition for the Nintendo DS, it still holds to this day. The reasons behind this dominance are numerous, but a significant part of it is due to the wealth of excellent and sometimes ground-breaking games that appeared on the PlayStation successor, and as Cuthbert continued to describe the early development of the PlayStation 2 in detail, it seems that future proofing the hardware was only half the challenge.

"We quickly got our hands dirty and worked out ways to use the architecture that perhaps wasn't intended by the engineers," Cuthbert recalls. "Mark Cerny's experiments led to the engine used for the *Jak And Daxter* and *Ratchet & Clank* games, while mine led to the duck demo and the optimising VU0 extensions for the development tools. The VU0 could be used as a co-processor in-line with the MIPS chip but there was no easy way to do that without writing to the assembler code, so I added support to the compiler and it proved very popular amongst western developers."

Cuthbert's duck demo was used to showcase the PlayStation 2's capabilities at the 1999 Tokyo Game Show and E3 2000. It also highlights the integration between disciplines that Holmdahl described as being so crucial. "My challenge was to do something with curved surfaces because [Ken] Kutaragi had a bee in his bonnet about faceted polygons," Cuthbert explains. "I started looking into the math behind it and quickly realised that nurbs (which were a buzzword back then) were too complicated to design with, never mind implement. To solve this, I created what I called burbs." »

Above: Some analysts predict that the next generation could be the last for traditional console hardware.



These were a less complicated and easier to envisage former of curved surfaces.

Without this level of creative programming during the early stages of the PlayStation 2's development, the console may have hit its stride far later than it actually did. You only need to look at the games that were released during its launch and then compare them to the magnum opuses of the later years to understand that a console's true potential is only realised through years of experimental coding. So as much as hardware architects like Holmdahl and his team are responsible for making a new console, it also takes talented programmers like Cuthbert to make a console work.

The right combination of technically minded people is undoubtedly the key component of a successful games console, but even so, you need significant financial backing and a little bit of luck to take a share of the market. This is something that the former director of strategy and marketing at Apple Computer and the founder of Electronic Arts, Trip Hawkins, is acutely aware of, as when Hawkins formed the 3DO Company in 1991 as a partnership between the likes of EA, Matsushita and TimeWarner, he set in motion a development cycle that would lead to one of the most ill-fated consoles in hardware history.

"I wanted game, hardware and Hollywood leaders from the beginning," Hawkins explains when asked about the optimistic origins of the 3DO Interactive Multiplayer console. "The formation was years in the making. It takes a long time to develop the key strategic relationships and to build trust […] I had some product design goals in the beginning and then happened to meet Dave Needle and Robert J. Mical who were like-minded and had already begun working on a new system design that could be aligned with my goals. I then combined that R&D effort with the business goals and strategies, such as the key ideas about the licensing models."

Left: Console makers have seen fierce competition recently.

Above: It may be an antique today but the NES was the most dominant console of its time.

"I WOULDN'T HAVE MADE IT IF I'D KNOWN THE PLAYSTATION WAS COMING OUT"

Above: Wii U sales have been growing steadily since its launch.



Above: The days of '*Sonic* vs. *Mario*' debates are long gone.



Above: Although it lost out to the PS2 in terms of sales, the original Xbox sold more software per console on average.

And much like the Xbox and PlayStation 2, the 3DO didn't start out as much of a looker. "The first system was an enormous wire-wrap contraption the size of a small doghouse that only Dave Needle really understood how to keep running," Hawkins reflects. "It was what you had to do to prototype a new chip design. We designed what went inside the box in terms of electronics, system software and tools. Each hardware licensee used our standards and specifications but could organise their own circuit board layouts and choose their own brand of CD-ROM drive." They even had creative freedom over the design of the external casing.

The idea of turning a profit on every console sold seems like a crazy business strategy by today's standards, but that doesn't mean the 3DO didn't have its fair share of good ideas. "We pretty much built what we set out to build," Hawkins confirms. "The daisy-chain design was ingenious and allowed for six-player *FIFA*. We also had hopes for TV-quality video with MPEG-1 but the data transfer rate wasn't high enough. This required the later development of MPEG-2 and DVD discs. We also trialed an internet-based interactive TV set-top box system with TimeWarner and USWest, but they never put it into production. It was the Internet before the Internet."

There are elements of the original 3DO concept that mirror the PlayStation 2 and even the Xbox One, but ultimately, the ambition was too far ahead of its time. "I wouldn't have made it if I had known the PlayStation was coming out when it did," Hawkins replies when asked about what he'd go back and change. "Sony did a great job in virtually every phase of execution. All I really wanted was a better system for the EA development teams, one that had 3D graphics, good sound and CD-ROM storage. Sony delivered. Hence the 3DO wasn't really necessary in the first place, even if it was a catalyst and influencer."

A failed system the 3DO may be, but it reinforces the sobering reality that console development is anything but a precise science. You can have the latest technological advancements firing on all cylinders inside the box, but unless the corporate backing is there to ensure the console gets the two things it needs the most – a large install base and a wealth of talented development studios working around the clock – it doesn't matter if it was designed by Tony Stark and assembled by Skynet. The lifecycle starts with the hardware itself, but that's only phase one

HARD WEARING

We asked our interviewees to describe the biggest challenges in console development…



TODD HOLMDAHL

"Keeping all the dependencies managed on a short timeline. The holiday season never moves, but we have hundreds of suppliers. It only takes one to screw up and that change can give you a bad day. Figuring out how to optimise the silicon is also hard. Having a good infrastructure to make all this come together without issue is key."



TRIP HAWKINS

"Designing and making a hardware system takes less calendar time now, perhaps one year instead of three. The real difficulty is in making killer apps and in investing the $1 billion or more required to build the install base, as it requires an investment in up-front losses or it's not going to happen. 3DO never had that kind of money whereas Sony invested $2 billion."



ED FRIES

"For me, the most challenging thing was trying to get a great set of games together in time. Fortunately we found the perfect partner in Bungie."





DYLAN CUTHBERT

"I think that's more of a question for Mark Cerny. I really don't envy him his task!"



of an on-going development process that tries to turn all that silicone into something truly desirable.

"The hardware could be fantastic but no one would care if we didn't have amazing games to show it off," Fries surmises. It's something that seems so obvious on the face of it and yet it's easy to forget that the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One will ultimately be remembered by the quality of their games. The console makers have done their best to ensure that both machines will be appealing for consumers and accessible for developers while remaining financially sustainable and technologically relevant for years to come. Only time will tell if the various disciplines managed to hit the sweet spot, but whatever the case, it's going to be fun finding out.

■ **Below** A lack of *Mario* gave the GameCube a lukewarm reception.



■ **Below:** The last cartridge-based console for Nintendo was the N64.

■ **Above:** Voted by our readers as the best console of all time, the Xbox 360.

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Reviews



96

Batman: Arkham Origins

Bruce Wayne has the longest night of his life in Warner Bros. Montreal's open-world prequel



THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven, and of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest – we'd never let that happen, and besides you'd smell it a mile off. And finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact, they are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists, designed to enlighten, inform, and engage. The gospel according to **games™**.













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WHO HE IS AND HOW HE CAME TO BE

Batman: Arkham Origins

There's a sense of inevitability about *Batman: Arkham Origins.* When Warner Bros announced that there would be a third in the hugely successful series, but that it wouldn't be developed by Rocksteady – arguably the reason the series has done so well – and instead by new developer Warner Bros Montreal, very few were surprised. Disappointed, perhaps, but not surprised; a studio purpose built for such a job doesn't necessary spell doom, but gamers are becoming increasingly savvy at utilising their innate cynicism these days.

And it's true that the familiarity will creep in fairly quickly with *Batman: Arkham Origins*; it isn't long before Batman is suited, booted and flapping his cape all about Gotham City once more. Mechanically very little has changed since Rocksteady's last outing, and those who played through *Arkham City* will know exactly what to expect. Combat, stealth and even Bat-cape flying all remain unchanged, the very same since the last game. To its credit Warner Bros Montreal is comfortable with that, providing very little in the way of tutorials or consistent drops in new strategies to overcome; it won't be long until you're up against recognisable armoured, shielded or even 'giant' foes – all of who are defeated in the very same manner as the last games. Beyond the odd tooltip here and there, *Batman: Arkham Origins* expects you to have played one of the games in the series before and that should be respected: few sequels are willing to demand such a level of previous gamer participation.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

MORE, MORE, MORE: If you enjoyed the last two *Batman* games you'll certainly enjoy this one too, but more needs to be do to improve the series rather than just treading water.

Sadly, that's where the praise ends on this front: the open world you have to explore is around two thirds the same as *Arkham City*. Park Row, Amusement Mile, Industrial District et al return, albeit with a new lease of life. There's less in the way of dilapidation – these are, for all intents and purposes, functioning homes and businesses – but the general geometry of the world looks the same, *feels* the same. A new neon sign here and there doesn't do much to mask that. Beyond the central bridge there is a little more to explore, but it's here where Gotham City loses some of its appeal the open world had in *Arkham City*, with tall buildings and less detail that highlighted Rocksteady's attention to its source material. It's disappointing since, for many, it was the reverence that the previous game held for the Caped Crusader that made it such a solid outing.

Sadly that attention to detail is lost on the story, too. *Arkham Origins* begins with Batman only two years since his first sighting, a determined attitude and sense of isolated justice. The story beats along at a predictable pace, with Black Mask calling out a hit on the Bat to have him assassinated; an extreme measure for so young a vigilante, perhaps. This is where a large crux of the criticism lies; where Warner Bros Montreal had free reign to play with the assumed mythical nature of Batman's earlier days, the world itself seems ready to accept the Batman as a common sighting – in spite of Vicki Vale's reporting on the 'first' confirmed sighting of the Dark Knight. Thugs are quick

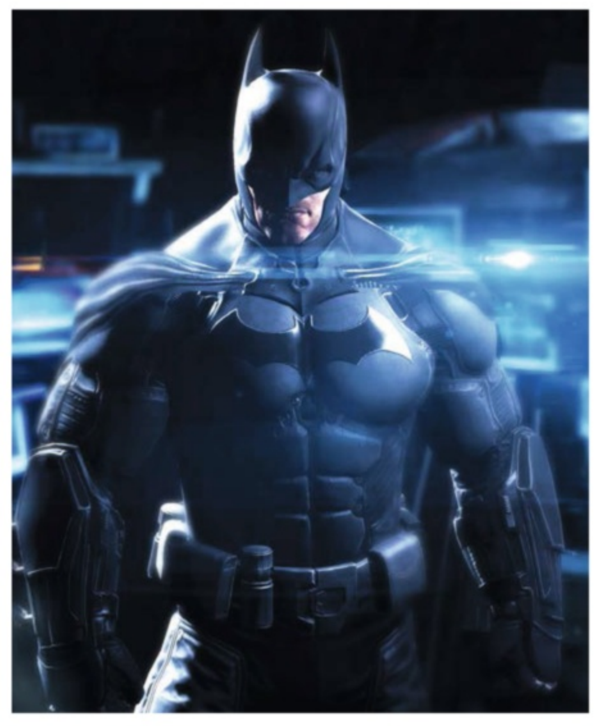
FEW SEQUELS ARE WILLING TO DEMAND SUCH A LEVEL OF PREVIOUS GAMER PARTICIPATION



DETAILS

FORMAT: PS3
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox 360, PC
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Warner Bros Entertainment
DEVELOPER: Warner Bros Montreal
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1-8
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

Right: *Arkham Origins* still manages to evoke a sense of power as Batman glides around the room in predator sequences and for that we're thankful. It is what this recent *Batman* series has done best.



Above: It's possible to return to the Batcave whenever you like. It's nice to see the iconic cavern fleshed out a little, but there isn't really that much to do here – beyond talking to Alfred for some 'wisdom'.

Left: *Arkham Origins* still manages to evoke a sense of power as Batman glides around the room in predator sequences and for that we're thankful. It is what this recent *Batman* series has done best.

BETTER THAN

THE AMAZING SPIDER-MAN





WORSE THAN

BATMAN ARKHAM CITY

TOO BOSSY

With eight assassins to pick from you'd hope for a bit of variety from the boss fights of *Arkham Origins*. Sadly almost all of them are just rehashes of ideas Rocksteady has already used: Copperhead is just the fight with Ra's Al Ghul from *Arkham City*, Firefly is just the fight with Poison Ivy from *Arkham Asylum* and Bane is – well – Bane. They won't all be main events – such as Deadshot – and even other side-options are little more than copycats from the last two *Batman* games. Take the Mad Hatter section, which is a poor rehash of the Scarecrow section in *Asylum*. It's here where the opportunity for invention was at its highest, but ultimately failed.



TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

10 MINS

Alfred has already made it clear he doesn't approve of Bruce Wayne's Batman, but like that'll stop him. Within minutes you're in-game and beating on thugs.

2 HOURS

Black Mask has played his hand, and Batman is out to stop him. That is what Batman does, after all, even if he hasn't quite made that name for himself in Gotham yet.

10 HOURS

The suitably offbeat tale of The Joker – and that's really what *Arkham Origins* is about – is close to its end, leaving the inevitable collectable hunt to begin.

ARKHAM ORIGINS IS A TALE LOOKING FOR WAYS TO TINGLE PARTICULAR NOSTALGIA GLANDS

to accept Batman's attacks, rather than give in to the fear, and why is Black Mask so keen to eliminate a presumed mythical enemy? As the story unfolds it becomes clear it's less about Batman, or even *Arkham Asylum*, and more about long-time counterpart The Joker once more. Though *Batman* fans will appreciate the world, its story and the lore, it feels a little lost – as though it was a tale looking for ways to tingle particular nostalgia glands as it ties into the story of how and why of *Arkham Asylum* – and, later, *Arkham City* – came to be, but not done with any real creativity. At times it can feel as rushed and cobbled together as the retextured *Gotham CIty*; as though it was one last effort to draw new appeal from Batman's existing fundamentals before the next generation begins. It's not that the story or world is bad, per se, just that it lacks some of the unidentifiable quality that Rocksteady has somehow imparted onto its *Batman* games.

But thankfully there is a heritage that redeems *Batman: Arkham Origins*, the core mechanics – while mostly unchanged, outside of new animations – remain as solidly entertaining as ever. Combat still has that now-iconic rhythm action flow to it, and a steady income of unlocks via challenges and XP gain mean you're still improving Batman over the course of the game. Predator sections remain stellar too, encapsulating – if somewhat overlooking – the essence of what makes Batman's skills in the art of stealth unmatched. Unchanged, but nonetheless as thoroughly enjoyable as ever. Still, 'more of the same' will likely be enough to tempt fans of the series into jumping into one final bout and these core mechanics have not dulled with repetition, if that's what you were wondering. It's fun, it's just nothing we haven't already seen and played hours of already.

PRE-APOCALYPSE

Though there's a certain appeal to exploring an undamaged Gotham City before it is cordoned off into Arkham City, the result is a world not quite as dense with detail. Amusement Mile is little more than a drab warehouse, while Industrial District looks decidedly dull. Worst of all is the lack of life; yes there's myriad thugs scattered throughout Gotham, but no innocent citizens milling about. *Arkham Origins* kicks off with a weather warning over the radio, perhaps pre-empting criticisms of unusual desolation, but this cheap ploy doesn't nothing to remove concerns that more could have been done to make Gotham feel like a real city.

Below: It's weird that – for what is presumably a 'functioning' city – Gotham doesn't seem to have anyone but armed thugs. *Arkham City*'s reasoning behind this was enough of an excuse, here it just feels a little lazy.



Left: Mad Hatter reappears in a visually interesting section, but without the surprise or the panache that came with the Scarecrow in *Asylum*.



Right: Don't get too excited, there is no option to fly the Batplane. One day, dear gamer, one day.





Above: With a $50 million bounty on his head, Batman has to rely on his morally questionable gadgetry more than ever.

With that said, more effort could have been made to rework Batman's abilities to a far greater extent. Let's not forget, this is the caped vigilante early on in his crusade and yet seemingly has access to a multitude of gadgets and doohickeys that perhaps he would not have had need of before. It's another missed opportunity as a back-to-basics *Batman* that could have evoked a sense of necessity as this sudden surge of supervillains causes the inventor to call on Fox for added assistance.

More than anything, however, the 'new' gadgets the Bat does acquire are embarrassingly similar to *Arkham City*'s roster of tools. The ice grenade is replaced – mechanically, at least – with a glue grenade, while the line launcher is now the Remote Claw. It feels lazy, and once again relies too much on following Rocksteady's example. A similar criticism can be cast towards the setpieces or dungeons, the former all inferior, reskinned versions of events that have been seen in *Asylum* or *City* and the latter sadly linear and uninspired. Many areas from *Arkham City* are reused and replastered so as to look different, but with less of the thought involved. Where both *Asylum* and *City* had dungeons that offered an objective to solve, often with *Zelda*-like puzzles to decode, *Origins* fails to offer anything on the same level: just one arena for combat or shadow stalking after another.

Inevitable is the only word for it; that at some point down the line a new *Batman* game in this particular chain was going to be imperfect. It's not even that *Batman: Arkham Origins* fails in any regard – it is, as already mentioned, more of the same, and sometimes that's just enough – but nor does it do anything to better, improve or even *alter* the proven template of *Arkham City*. There's a sense that Warner Bros Montreal kept itself in check at the behest of fans, fearing the outcry the untested developer would fall victim to had it dared to change any element in this much-loved – yet still decidedly young – series. Undeniably there's a solid game here, and a complete overhaul of the city – even if it is mostly a city we've already turned upside down – will give *just* enough reinvigoration for fans to lose themselves in Gotham all over again. Rocksteady's heritage lives on in *Batman: Arkham Origins* and for that alone it's worth playing; it still empowers in all the same ways *Asylum* and *City* had done before it. But if you had hoped for more in a fashion similar to the evolution that *Arkham City* brought to *Arkham Asylum*'s core then you will be sadly disappointed. Still, a strong imitation, one that will tide us over until the Man Of Steel inevitably gets here.

Above: Alfred is used mostly as a cheap character device to provide the inevitable call-to-arms for Batman. More could have been done here.

FAQs

Q. COLLECTABLES, PRESUMABLY?
Of course. Riddler Trophies are now Enigma Datapacks, Security Cameras are Enigma Relays and a multitude of others we've already seen.

Q. OPEN WORLD?
It's interesting to see Gotham pre-*Arkham City*, but it really is little more than the odd new sign or retextured walls.

Q. AND THE DUNGEONS?
They don't feel quite as open or important as *Asylum* or *City*, but their linearity does present the game with a little more focus.

WORLDWIDE
TAKING GAMING ONLINE

DOUBLE TAKEDOWN: Multiplayer is included in *Batman Arkham Origins*, but as you might expect neither adds nor detracts from the overall experience. An interesting aside, and nothing more.

VERDICT 7/10
SOLIDLY PUT TOGETHER BUT A BIT UNINSPIRING

EVERYTHING IS CRISPER AND CLEANER, AND A DRAW DISTANCE THAT EXTENDS FOR MILES CREATES SOME BREATHTAKING VIEWS

A FARRR CRY

The ecosystem in *Black Flag* is directly reminiscent of the one found in another terrific Ubisoft game: *Far Cry 3*. Unlike in *Assassin's Creed III* – where animal pelts were only really good for selling – here you'll have to travel far and wide if you want to be able to craft all of the tools and toys available to Edward throughout the campaign. Different species are highlighted on different areas of the map, but the ability to hunt some things – like sharks and whales – can't be obtained until you've passed a certain point in the story. Needless to say, it is possible to get by without hunting anything at all but as ever, that exploration reaps its own rewards. Discovering hidden areas (and riches) doesn't take long to get very addictive indeed.





TIMBERS BE SHIVERED: IT'S THE PIRATE GAME YOU'VE ALWAYS WANTED

Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PS3, Xbox 360, Wii U, PC
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-8
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

We've seen franchises exhaust themselves time and again in the world of videogames. Once a game becomes an annual event, selling in excellent numbers but often stifling itself creatively, from a consumer perspective, it's easy to get bored. *Assassin's Creed* has clearly suffered from this very situation – *ACIII* sold millions, but had a lukewarm critical reception and felt like a mess of half-baked ideas. So is it unrealistic to expect *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* to be any better?

ACIV sees the team taking a step back and reassessing what made the series a success in the first place, before coming at it from a fresh angle. It helps that this angle in question is one of the most popular and character-rich periods of history – piracy in 1700s Caribbean. The *Assassin's Creed* series has always excelled at dropping players into a slightly exaggerated form of history and letting them soak in the atmosphere, and *ACIV* is a similarly great example. Several games have tackled the era, but few have pulled it off this well. Our pirate in question is Welshman Edward Kenway, grandfather of *ACIII* hero Connor. Leaving Wales to become a privateer, Edward quickly falls into a life of crime and is already an established pirate as the game begins.

This is a far more lighthearted game than *ACIII*, thanks largely to its protagonist. Edward has the same careless arrogance that made Ezio Auditore so popular, a far cry from the boring Connor. Edward is a pirate first and an assassin second, and this extends to his motivations and attitude. He is a refreshingly selfish character in a series that tends to lean towards do-gooders.

When it comes to controlling him, this is largely the same game as *ACIII*. Control is once again the biggest problem the game has: *ACIII* suffered from over-simplified controls, and *Black Flag* is little different. Free running is as simple as holding a button as you move, a method so basic it sometimes seems as if the game is playing itself. It also causes Edward to stick to every object he comes across as you run, a familiar *AC* problem. It's not uncommon to run towards something, only to hop onto a little ledge in the way and stubbornly refuse to come down. It's never been a deal breaker, but appears to be a problem that the development team simply cannot fix.

The other big problem is combat, again easy to the point of playing itself. Holding back and waiting for a counter is still the failsafe way to kill almost every foe in the game, and those that can't be taken down this way simply need to be disarmed with a single button press first. Huge battles can be exciting, but the lack of any challenge also removes a feeling of achievement.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

NAVAL COMBAT: Did you think that *ACIII*'s naval combat was the best thing in it? Then prepare to be spoiled. In *Black Flag* it's no mere side diversion: it's the backbone of the whole experience.

In the ways *Black Flag* is similar to *ACIII* it is similarly disappointing, but luckily this is a game with a surprising number of new and different ideas. Several cited the naval combat of *ACIII* to be its best aspect, and sailing is a huge focus of *Black Flag*. Pass the first few hours and Edward becomes the owner of his own brig, The Jackdaw. Initial pacing is slow but as soon as you take the helm of your ship the game opens up and allows you to do your own thing. The open world is absolutely huge, stretching out for leagues in every direction. The potential for exploration is exciting.

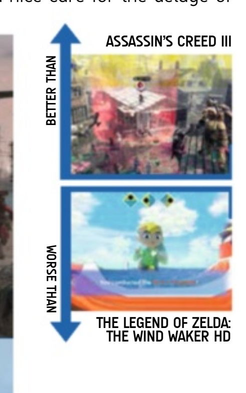
This is where the benefit of playing on a next-gen system becomes apparent. The leap in graphics quality isn't enormous, but substantial enough to be impressive. Everything is crisper and cleaner, and a draw distance that extends for miles creates some breathtaking views. It helps that this is a very colourful game, the verdant green jungles and deep blue seas a nice cure for the deluge of

Left: Wild animals are dotted around from the off, and feel like a more organic part of the environment than they did in *Assassin's Creed III*.



Above: Naturally the British government aren't particularly happy about the proliferation of pirates, despite being self-righteous amoral invaders themselves.

Left: This sort of thing ends up happening a lot on the high seas. You're never short of enemies to battle on the water.



brown that fills most triple-A releases. The game is almost entirely without loading, only the transitions between the main world and a few large cities requiring a pause. Subtle things like weather effects also benefit from the next-gen tech, with foliage blowing realistically in the wind and some great looking rain. It's not a huge leap forward, but it's a good first step.

Sailing around for the sake of exploration and discovery is where *Black Flag* is the most enjoyable. There is sense of serene calm as you set off into the blue with no destination but your own curiosity. The physics of the ocean are impressive, the Jackdaw rising and sinking with the swell of the tide. Battling through a storm is thrilling, trying to survive enormous rogue waves and roaming whirlwinds as your ship gets bounced around and your crew clings on for dear life.

Ship combat has been improved and upgraded to become the best part of *Black Flag*. English, Spanish and civilian ships litter the waves, and as a pirate it's your choice to destroy and capture them as you see fit. The Jackdaw is fitted with a number of different weapons on the front, back and sides, with players not only sailing but also aiming and firing the weapons. It's an initially complicated control scheme, a stark contrast to the easy on-foot fighting. Once you've had some practice and really feel in control, emerging victorious from huge ship battles is a rush.

The Jackdaw has a huge amount of upgrades available, from stronger cannons and armour to brand new weapons, such as a very useful mortar. The player can spy on far ships with the telescope, finding out at a glance the cargo they are carrying as well as their relative level of power. Huge ships that will originally destroy you slowly become viable prey as you upgrade your ship, lending a feeling of growth and vindication as you become a force to be reckoned with.

An incapacitated ship can be either sunk or captured by pulling up alongside and reeling it in. These captures are extremely exciting as Edward and his crew leap over to the other ship and take out its crew at close range. Both ships are entirely climbable, and leaping down to the enemy boat from your own mast is the kind of superhero athleticism that the series excels at. Captured ships can be stripped for parts or repurposed but if you really can't be bothered, sinking them still nets the player the goods onboard – a welcome nod to accessibility.

There is no shortage of boats to destroy; even though the world is huge, it's rare to have no other ships in view. The amount of them is slightly silly, elbowing immersion to the side and reminding you relatively sharply that you're playing a game, but it's still preferable to having to spend ten minutes sailing around, searching for a target.

The story tying it all together isn't particularly inspiring, but benefits from the likable main character and swathe of infamous figures that make an appearance, such as Blackbeard. It suffers a bit from the same sci-fi nonsense that littered past games, but luckily this is kept to a minimum.

The biggest problem with the main story is an over reliance on a few core types of missions. Tailing and eavesdropping in particular is an objective that appears far too

FAQs

Q. WHICH SHIPS DO I PILLAGE?
You can see exactly what cargo each vessel is carrying by examining it with your real-time telescope.

Q. WHO DID THE SOUND-TRACK?
Regular composer Lorne Balfe is out, and *Far Cry 3*'s composer Brian Tyler is in. His score is outstanding.

Q. FUTURISTIC BITS WORTH EXPLORING?
Not really. But if you were annoyed by *ACIII*'s curt ending, snooping around in Abstergo HQ will reveal some new info about Desmond's fate.



Right: It's this sort of pirate-superhero stuff that is key to the success of *Assassin's Creed IV*. It's pleasing that the developers managed to extract the one excellent element of the preceding game and build upon it.



Below: Multiplayer returns to *Assassin's Creed IV*, but sadly we didn't get to sample this on PlayStation 4 in the time available. Functionality is the same across all versions.



TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

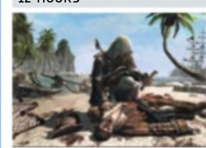
THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

1 HOUR



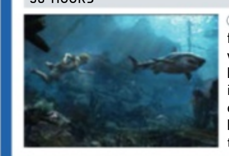
Black Flag starts too slowly, a common problem with this series, as it turns out. You're still a few hours from getting a boat to play around with, but the tropical world looks fantastic.

12 HOURS



Well into the story, by this point. Edward's a much more fun protagonist that Connor ever was, a little more like Ezio Auditore in terms of his general brand of international charisma.

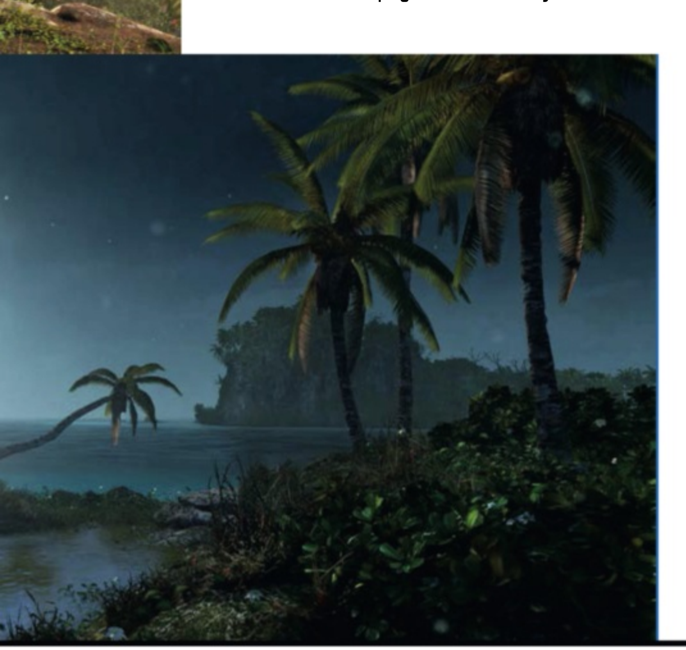
30 HOURS



Hunting high and low for the last few species whose noble deaths will help upgrade Edward's inventory to the upper echelons. A lot of whales have died by this point in the game.

WHERE ACIII FAILED...

Not to get too forensic about the failings of *Assassin's Creed III*, which still offered a satisfying overall but undernourished experience, *Black Flag* manages to succeed in its wake by improving the player's relationship with the environment. The world of *ACIII* was there for the sake of it, with animals roaming with little purpose progression-wise and combat encounters that were almost always exactly the same. Here, your relationship with the environment absolutely makes sense, and where *ACIII* had no incentive for exploration, here it's the lifeblood of everything you're doing. There's a *Wind Waker*-like feeling of validation to the exploration that turns out to be a very good fit for *Assassin's Creed*. Here's hoping it continues next year.



often and quickly becomes tiresome. Existing to further the plot, following some other characters slowly as they give exposition on the situation has never been much fun.

Luckily, there is plenty to do aside from the main quest. Besides the obligatory collectables, players can take on extra assassination missions, send their fleet out to perform tasks remotely, explore undersea wreckage for elusive booty, hunt sharks and whales via a fun if desensitising harpooning minigame, raid storehouses for stuff to sell, craft and upgrade their kit with various animal skins, track down ancient Aztec treasures and recruit new sailors to their crew. The story alone will take around 25-30 hours, and with all of the above and more to get through, getting that 100 per cent is a time consuming task.

Keeping track of what's been done and where is easy thanks to a surprisingly good map. Accessed by pressing in the touchpad, the map can be navigated by touching, swiping and pinching the pad like you would on a tablet or smartphone. Using your thumbs to pinch and stretch to zoom the map in and out is easy and moving the map with a swipe is great. This is precisely the kind of innovation that we want to see more of with the PS4 touchpad.

As an *Assassin's Creed* game, *Black Flag* wouldn't be complete without a slightly unwelcome present day section. The endlessly boring Desmond has finally, and thankfully. departed and players instead now control a new employee at Abstergo Entertainment, reporting for their first day at work to delve through the memories of Edward Kenway and make a game of the best bits. It's silly and it's meta and, of course, there are some nefarious forces behind the scenes and plenty of conspiracies that cause things to quickly spiral out of control, but there's no need to pay it any mind. Curious players can go around hacking computers to find out snippets about what's going on, but those eager to get back into the pirate life can usually do so in a few minutes. If the series insists on keeping this modern day hook, this is the way to do – unobtrusive, quick and painless but with the capacity for exploration.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

STOP PANDERING TO CASUAL PLAYERS: There is absolutely no benefit to the easiness of the near-automated combat and platforming, a remnant of *Assassin's Creed III*'s nonsense.

Assassin's Creed III was sadly something of a disappointment, but Ubisoft Montreal must be commended for learning from its mistakes. The endless problems of easy combat and sticky, simple running may return but the rest is entertaining enough to make up for it. An energetic new protagonist, a focus on piracy and pillaging, excellent naval combat and a huge, beautiful open world make *Black Flag* an easy game to recommend, and a decent way to kick off the next generation.

VERDICT 8/10

SMART, PROGRESSIVE AND WONDERFULLY EXCITING

BRINGING A WHOLE NEW DIMENSION TO THE SERIES

Pokémon X/Y

You've got a new Pokémon that you've been training for a few days. You know it'll evolve, but you don't know what its final form will be. You grind away, knocking off paltry foes to harvest experience and you begin to form a relationship with your Pokémon. You actually begin to like its underpowered form; despite its mid-evolution flaws, it's certainly got its charms, and hey, you've had it for *ages* now. You eventually come to love it. Then, the screen goes white. 'Huh? [Pokémon] is evolving' appears, along with that old Safari Zone jingle. You watch, finger hovering precariously over the B button, tempted to cancel the evolution and keep what you know and love forever. But the white fades, and as the screen refocuses and your Pokémon's new sprite comes into view, you nod to yourself and think 'Yeah, that looks great. Everything's going to be fine.'

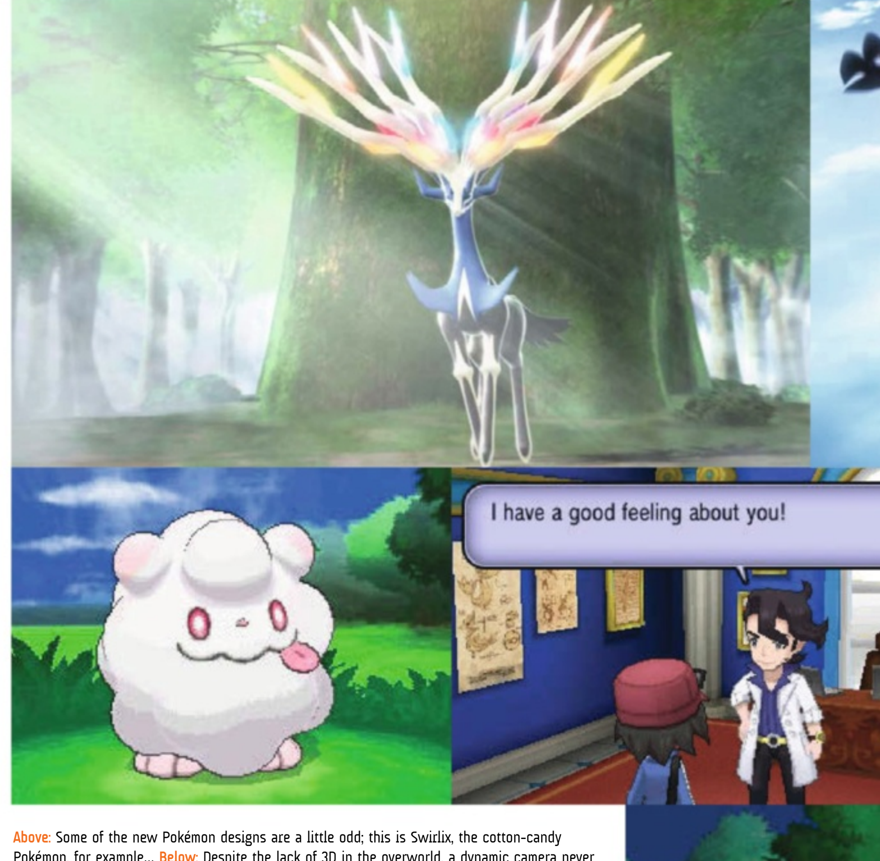
That is *Pokémon X/Y*. If you think of the original Game Boy versions as the starters – the seminal child-friendly RPGs that introduced a generation of gamers into the world of the JRPG – then the DS overhauls were the difficult teenage years of the franchise. The Sinnoh and Unova regions received their fair share of criticism, but without their growing pains, we wouldn't have the fully-rounded *Pokémon* games that we have on the 3DS today.

Where better to lay the foundations for a new *Pokémon* era than Europe – a completely fresh location within the *Pokémon* world. Kalos acts as a toy-town France: replete with its own Eiffel Tower, miniature chateaus, run-down hotels and coastal villages. Every city has a clothing boutique, and there are a variety of cafés to visit; some where you can battle, some where you can socialise. It's all very Parisian, and it gives the world a sense of unity and cohesion that, oddly enough, reminds us more of *FFX*'s Spira than any other *Pokémon* world; it's that sense of everything being relevant to everything else in a world teeming with life.

Where before you've had to wade through hours of early-game fodder to reach interesting Pokémon with varied typing, *X/Y* offers a plethora of beasts straight away. You bump into a level 11 Dragon type, and it fits in the world – 'a dragon *would* live here', you think. Every route feels like a genuinely different place – you'll be scouring grass patches for hours, hunting for that rare Pokémon you *know* is on that route somewhere. With the introduction of

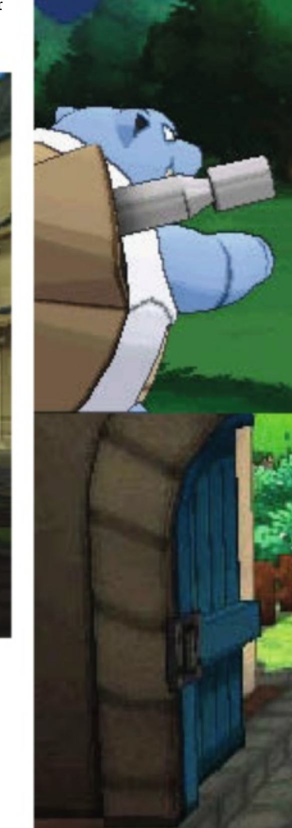
DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Game Freak
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



Above: Some of the new Pokémon designs are a little odd; this is Swirlix, the cotton-candy Pokémon, for example... Below: Despite the lack of 3D in the overworld, a dynamic camera never lets you want for things to look at: every route seems designed to show off Kalos and what Game Freak can do with the graphical power of the 3DS.





EVOLUTION OF THE SPECIES

While longtime fans of the franchise may balk at the idea of their favourite Pokémon gaining an extra evolutionary form, the impact of the radical mechanic is tangible: gaining new abilities, different typesets or even more attacks per turn, Mega Evolutions are as important to the deep battle mechanics as they are to the central narrative. The mutations are impermanent, and you can only have one per battle, with the transformation requiring a held stone that prevents you from using other tactical items. Some of the Mega designs are either a little lazy or over-designed, but the trade-off in aesthetic for practicality is completely worth it.





FAQs

Q. CAN I COMPLETE THE POKÉDEX?
Yes, but it's going to take transfers from all your old games and a lot of social interaction to do.

Q. IS PIKACHU IN IT?
Yes, and it's the only Pokémon that actually says its name, rather than a emitting a lo-fi squeal.

Q. HOW LONG IS IT?
You can rush the main game in about 30 hours, but a slew of post-game content can keep you rapt for 100+ hours.

Fairy type, Game Freak forces veteran fans to reconsider their teams – while *Pokémon X/Y* may be easier than their predecessors, the games introduce so much new content that you'll never find yourself bored or wanting for something to do.

Game Freak has always understood how to push the hardware it's using to the limit, and while the 3D elements of the games are underwhelming (no 3D in the overworld, frame-rate issues with 3D in battle), the graphics themselves are some of the best we've seen on the 3DS; you can clearly see why the 2DS was launched the same day as this game.

The thought of cel-shaded models had us wary – but Game Freak delivered, capitalising on the reinvention. There are now over 700 Pokémon (including Mega-Evolutions) and each of them has been attentively recreated in 3D, the subtle animations of each one ceaselessly entertaining. Every time we encountered a new Pokémon, we were freshly surprised at how richly detailed it was. It compounded our latent compulsions to go out and, as they say, catch 'em all.

Game Freak has always asserted that the *Pokémon* franchise is about socialising – about trading and communicating with other trainers to forge your perfect team. *Pokémon X/Y* reinforces that point sublimely; whenever you're attached to WiFi, there's a constant stream of 'passersby' available to interact with. Trading, battling, passing over O-powers (renamed Pass Powers from the previous generation) and simply communicating is all there, available to you from anywhere in the overworld. Our story progression was substantially slowed by sudden urges to jump into online battles – either random or chosen – or search blindly for our favourite Pokémon to trade (sadly there were no Scythers available at the time of writing).

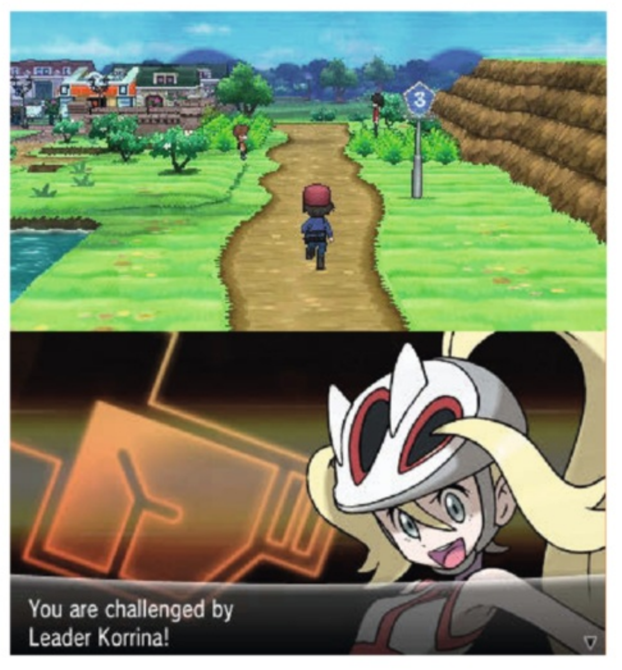
ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

RIGHT THERE WITH 'EM: The translation to 3D has put you right into the battle – rather than flat bouts, dynamic ground-level camera angles follow your Pokémon's moves to make battles more engrossing.

Pokemon X/Y is the result of generations of refinements, culminating in a *Pokémon* experience that brings the series closer to perfection than any previous instalment. It's quicker, more accessible and has a lot more depth than past instalments. It's a result of Game Freak thinking pro-actively; it has clearly listened to what fans want. For the hardcore, the metagame continues, and the visibility of core stats improves the experience. Between this and Mega Evolutions, you'll need to revise everything you knew about competitive battling.

EVERY TIME WE ENCOUNTERED A NEW POKÉMON, WE WERE FRESHLY SURPRISED AT HOW RICHLY DETAILED IT WAS



Above: When trainers are introduced, their sprite takes up the whole upper screen, and special trainers have introductory animations. It's little touches like these that help breathe life into the games. Left: Camera angles change from one area to the next; everything moves all the time, making the whole game feel animated and alive.

Red/Blue had a significant impact on the way its Nineties audience perceived the roleplaying game, and rightfully furthered its broader acceptance among mainstream players. Game Freak has done young gamers a service with *X/Y*, laying the foundations to allow a new generation a taste of what potential emotive depth there is in this genre. The core formula has had slow refinements enacted upon it, but *X/Y* feel like a triumphant return to the central philosophy that made *Red/Blue* great – these are games about exploration, and getting in touch with that childish joy of the undiscovered.



VERDICT 9/10
THE INSPIRED FORMULA SHOWS OFF 3DS' CAPABILITIES

ANOTHER PITSTOP ON SONIC'S DOWNFALL?

Sonic Lost World

DETAILS

FORMAT: Wii U
OTHER FORMATS: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Sega
DEVELOPER: Sonic Team
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

Cylindrical levels are *Sonic Lost World*'s unique selling proposition, and they're as effective as often as they're irritating. At their best, they allow the designers at Sonic Team to create multiple routes through colourfully detailed levels that promise exciting second playthroughs in the best tradition of the series, but at their worst they lob you off the environment as a punishment for a lack of precision the controls don't really allow.

It's faster and more traditionally *Sonic* than the poor 3DS version (reviewed on the next page), but *Lost World* is still just a little further from greatness than it should be. Levels are generally well-paced and don't outstay their welcome, while the return of the Wisp powers from *Sonic Colors* adds a touch of unobtrusive variety to the platforming, even if their addition is still a little frivolous.

Critics say it every time, and there's a reason they do so – *Sonic* is always at its best when the blue hedgehog is just platforming, speeding through pretty levels with superb music and bouncing off enemies in a sprint to the finish line. *Lost World* is certainly capable of this, and at its best, that's what the game is. Yet *Sonic Lost World* is also laced with difficulty spikes, even in the earliest worlds, that will undoubtedly sour the experience for younger players, as will the sometimes headache-inducing perception of gravity in *Sonic Lost World.*

Running along narrow walkways just isn't a great fit with this control scheme. Sonic feels slightly too sensitive to guide, and for those levels that barely offer anything in terms of alternate routes, it's more about memorising where the design gets annoyingly precise as opposed to actually enjoying the journey ahead.

The best decision made with *Lost World* is to actually slow Sonic down. *Generations* was reasonably successful in creating these 3D races to the finish through a nostalgic lens – yet once again, any moment that required a modicum of specific timing was just too unwieldy for such a speed-oriented main character. But even *Generations* was too excessively fast for the player to appreciate any nuances to the level design outside of

Right: Sometimes, the cylindrical levels offer new potential for Sonic Team's designers, but mostly they turn stages into spiralling nightmares where the conclusion is unclear and the pace is brought to a standstill.

Below: There is nothing very exciting about the enemy types, who are all either variations on existing Sonic alumni or new versions of derpy creatures you've seen in everything ever.

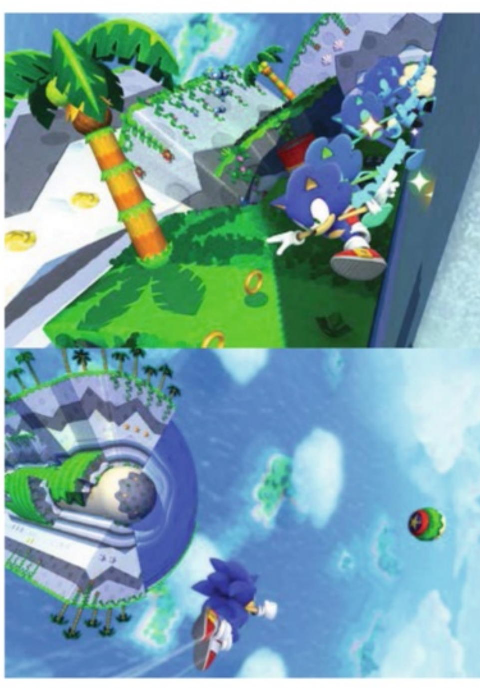


Below: Once again, there's nothing wrong with the visuals of *Sonic* – indeed, these rival *Super Mario 3D World* in detail – it's all to do with the gameplay in 3D.

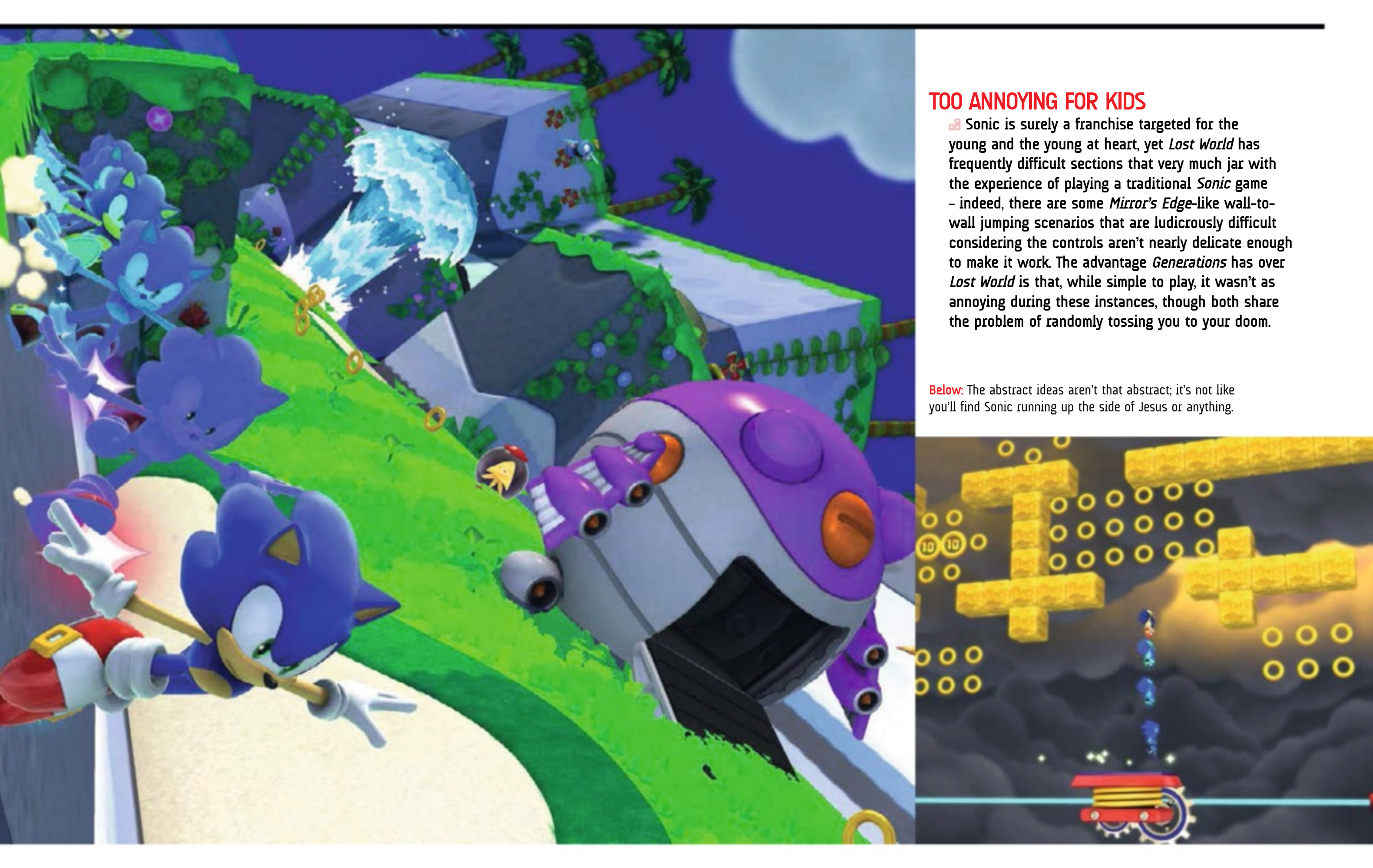
Below: There's a healthy bit of Mega Drive-era iconography in there, and at least we can take relief in the fact Sonic isn't dating human women anymore.



YOU WILL END UP IN SCENARIOS THAT DON'T FIT THE USUAL SONIC MOULD, A POTENTIALLY IMPORTANT BREAKTHROUGH



Above: These *Mario Galaxy*-inspired bits offer a nice view of just how much world Sonic Team has constructed for Sonic's debut on Wii U. Don't play it if you easily get motion sickness.



TOO ANNOYING FOR KIDS

Sonic is surely a franchise targeted for the young and the young at heart, yet *Lost World* has frequently difficult sections that very much jar with the experience of playing a traditional *Sonic* game – indeed, there are some *Mirror's Edge*-like wall-to-wall jumping scenarios that are ludicrously difficult considering the controls aren't nearly delicate enough to make it work. The advantage *Generations* has over *Lost World* is that, while simple to play, it wasn't as annoying during these instances, though both share the problem of randomly tossing you to your doom.

Below: The abstract ideas aren't that abstract; it's not like you'll find Sonic running up the side of Jesus or anything.

the somewhat mis-directed dedication to recapturing the character's glory days. *Lost World* is slower, and that was a pretty good idea. When navigating Sonic's hyper-detailed world, it allows you to appreciate the way enemies and obstacles have been placed, as opposed to blasting through identical corridors at needlessly silly speeds.

As detailed in our preview a couple of months ago, Sonic has three different speed settings – his default low acceleration if you really want to be ultra-cautious, a faster setting triggered by the R button and the spin dash, which enables the quickest of the three. Big open levels let you use speed liberally, while tighter Death Star Trench Run-like ones require the use of each setting.

Even more so than *Rayman Legends*, there's no reason that *Sonic Lost World* couldn't really have been released on other consoles as well or even instead of on the Wii U – something that Wii U aficionados wouldn't like to hear, of course, but beyond a couple of touchscreen gimmicks, it's basically just a progression map that could easily be part of the HUD. There is no fundamental reason this has to be on Wii U, and visually it looks in line with *Generations* on PS3 and 360; that is to say, technically extraordinary with little slowdown. The hyperrealism of *Generations* and *Unleashed* has been replaced with a slightly more colourful cartoon-y direction, though you'd only really notice the difference if you're feeling especially pedantic.

The worlds themselves do look very nice, and despite each world being divided into typical themes, like Emerald Hill Zone-esque greenery, water, snow, desert and so on, there's a fair bit of differentiation between individual stages – they have a nice tendency to reinvent themselves on the fly, so your surroundings won't be identical through each. You will end up in scenarios that don't fit the usual *Sonic* mould, a potentially important breakthrough for the designers of these games who haven't so far found a perfect middle ground for bringing *Sonic* into 3D after 14 years.

Another nice touch is the boardgame-like grid structure of the level selection screen, obviously inspired by the adorable presentation of *Super Mario 3D Land*'s worlds. While on the 3DS it doesn't make too much of a difference having this overworld, here Sonic can run around the surrounding areas, take part in minigames and claim items as rewards for progress. It's nothing especially significant, but like the little hub areas in *Generations*, that extra degree of presentation is a welcome addition.

Yet we find ourselves torn on *Sonic Lost World* due to its bizarre inconsistencies. At its best, it's more creatively stimulated than any *Sonic* game released in the past 16 years, but yet this experience is dragged down by so many weaker levels, including rote bosses that are only slightly better than those in the 3DS version, as well as awful difficulty spikes. The cylindrical level idea is along the right track for the *Sonic* franchise working properly in 3D in a way that's competitive to modern platformers, but only a tighter game will really bring that concept to life.

FAQs

Q. IS THERE A STORY?
Oh god yes, and it's appalling, with Sonic's entire cast sounding like the cast of *90210*.

Q. ARE THE LEVELS THE SAME ON 3DS?
No, totally different, and way worse on a handheld. The same style of levels applies, though.

Q. WHICH VERSION IS BEST?
Wii U. Turn the page and we'll take you through the disappointing 3DS edition of *Sonic Lost World*.

BETTER THAN: SONIC THE HEDGEHOG (2006)

WORSE THAN: SONIC GENERATIONS

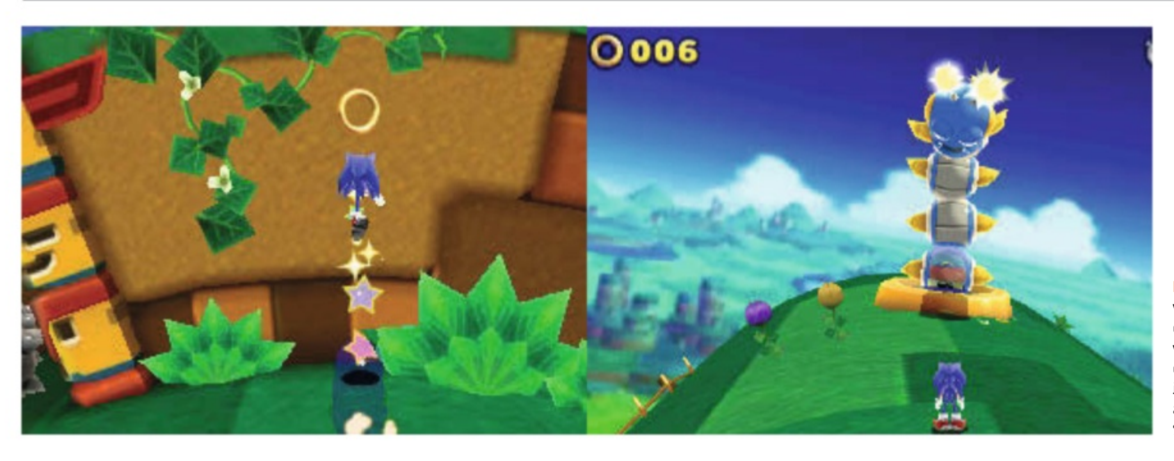
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WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

DITCH THE WISPS: They worked for the purposes of *Sonic Colors*' design but they just don't ruddy work here.

VERDICT 6/10

A FLAWED PLATFORMER WITH A ROUGH ESSENCE OF GREATNESS



Left It's odd how the two versions compare – a lot of the same enemies and visuals recur across both consoles, yet the Wii U one is faster and tighter on almost every single count. Still not great, mind.

IT'S NOT EASY BEING BLUE

Sonic: Lost World

It's 10pm and we're on the phone while playing *Sonic: Lost World* on a 3DS. It's okay, we're not missing out on anything new as we attempt to multi-task – this is a level we already played last night in the second world which uncharacteristically crashed just as we reached the final 30 seconds. We're fighting sand worms, as well as *Sonic*'s appalling combat controls, for the umpteenth time and accidentally shout a swear word down the receiver.

Sonic: Lost World admirably attempts to bring a 3D Sonic experience to a console that is theoretically well-suited to it. Through a combination of slack, repetitive level design, sometimes awful controls and an impractical camera, however, *Lost World* demonstrates that handheld titles in the series really should stick to a side-on perspective. At times it's one of the best-looking games on the handheld, yet painfully frustrating on the whole.

Lost World doesn't have the sporadic creativity of the Wii U version's level design, and instead suffers at any moment where you're forced to rely on Sonic's returning *Colors* powers. These include a lightning ability to zip across big gaps, as well as a squid-like power where Sonic manoeuvres quickly in a 3D space through oceans in a way that's hair-tearingly sensitive to guide. Yet none of these add anything fun to *Sonic*'s existing formula due to the game's bad controls – a perennial problem for modern *Sonic*. *Lost World* is undoubtedly at its best when you're bombing through tunnel-shaped levels and successively bouncing off the top of enemies, as per the franchise's classic guise.

Another major issue comes in the sensitivity of the controls – in trying to both offer accuracy and put some training wheels on the speed, you never quite feel in full control of Sonic when he's at a standstill. Trying to tackle any of the platforming sections with precision is almost completely a waste of time, and the game's messed up perception of gravity will sometimes throw you off the world in a way that'll have you chewing the side of the 3DS. The camera, meanwhile, makes it impossible to venture back through levels even a little in search of rings, since you won't see enemies coming.

The combat ideas are awfully implemented, the stages fall back on their individual gimmicks to an unhealthy degree and the levels are far too long for a handheld *Sonic* game, sometimes taking more time to complete than those on the *Wii U*. *Sonic: Lost World* is so infrequently entertaining on the 3DS, and, lacking the spark and scale of the home console version's levels, this is a far cry from the quality of *Colors* or the *Sonic Advance* titles on handheld Nintendo devices.

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Sega
DEVELOPER: Dimps/Sonic Team
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

AS GOOD AS — SONIC UNLEASHED

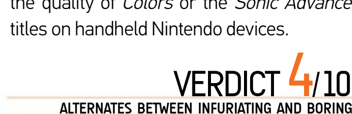


WORSE THAN — SONIC ADVENTURE

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

TOO LONG: Levels in *Sonic* games should last about eight minutes, maximum. Some of *Lost World*'s take about 15 minutes to beat.



ALTERNATES BETWEEN INFURIATING AND BORING



Above: This no doubt looks lovely for a 3DS game and is at least comparable to the Wii U version. It's just so unfortunately annoying to play, and only occasionally fun.

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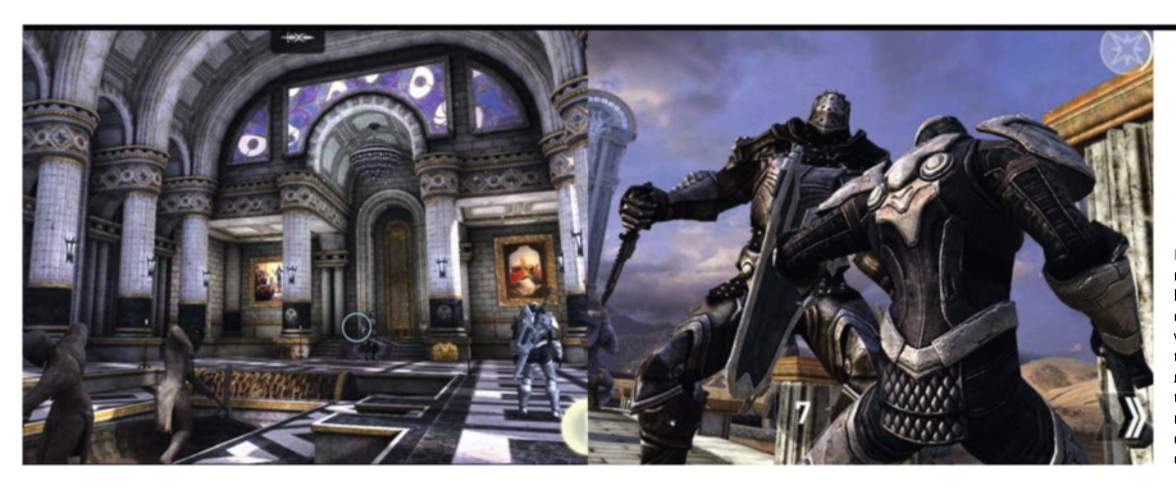
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Left: The environments are nothing if not impressive, but this makes the lack of freedom all the more wasteful. There is still treasure to spot as a reward for those with trained eyes, but there's not enough genuine exploration of this detailed world.

PROOF THAT NOTHING SHOULD LIVE FOREVER

Infinity Blade III

If you were worried that *Infinity Blade III* had lost some of the series' importance then fear not – it still manages to remain the beacon of mobile gaming. The difference is, however, that the App Store has changed dramatically over the last couple of years. Where the original *Infinity Blade* introduced the possibilities of touch-screen gaming and was – rightly or wrongly – heralded as the future, *Infinity Blade III* hasn't really changed that template. In doing so it has become a valid criticism of the state of mobile gaming: when something works, developers are seemingly finding ways to rinse and repeat their existing ideas rather than look for new angles, opportunities or ideas. Part and parcel of such an impenetrable market, undoubtedly.

As a result, if you've played *Infinity Blade* before then you'll know what to expect here. Your sword-wielding avatar will progress through the world one tap at a time, encountering increasingly difficult warriors. Combat hasn't changed at all, and though it still works well, it feels disappointing to find that Chair hasn't evolved this in any distinguishable way. You can duke it out as new character Isa, but the difference isn't particularly vast. The lack of change to combat isn't such a problem in itself, but when *Infinity Blade III* still relies on the repeated playthroughs to level up your hero and decimate previously tough bosses, it just highlights how uninspired the series has become.

There's a sense of spectacle about the story now, at the very least, with voice acting from Troy Baker to improve the quality of the cutscenes. We'd be thankful of the efforts if the story wasn't such a mismatch of sci-fi and fantasy nonsense though, leaving *Infinity Blade III* with far too many cut-scenes and not nearly enough emphasis on gameplay. At this point exploration should employ a much greater level of freedom, rather than restricting players to tapping one of two options and watching another cutscene play out.

There's also the excessive focus on in-app purchasing. *Infinity Blade III* is £4.99 – a fairly high price when compared to the rest of the market – so advertising myriad options of enhancing your game feels a little cynical. Perhaps ultimately that's the problem not just with *Infinity Blade III* but with the struggles of tablet and smartphone gaming. We're arguably past the innovative honeymoon period of the platform and games like *Infinity Blade* will only ever exasperate these issues. As it stands, *Infinity Blade III* is playable, yes, but nothing new.

DETAILS

FORMAT: iPad
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Epic Games
DEVELOPER: Chair Entertainment
PRICE: £4.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

INFINITY BLADE II





WORSE THAN

DARK MEADOW

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

DUNGEON KEEPER: Roguelikes are becoming increasingly popular and *Infinity Blade*'s design could match such a style of play, but there needs to be much more effort put in place to advance the series.

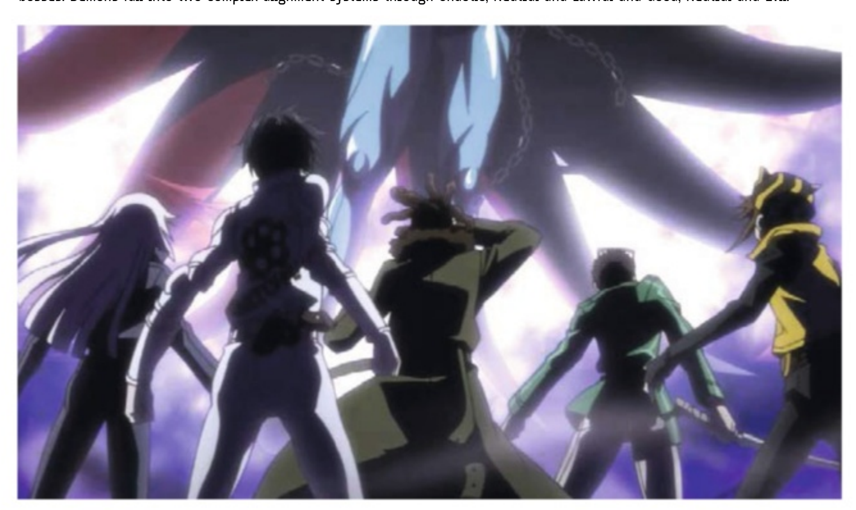
VERDICT 5/10

FANCY VISUALS WON'T HIDE REPETITIVE GAMEPLAY



Above: There's no faulting the presentation of the story, it's just a little more intrusive than an experience as slight as *Infinity Blade* really requires. It sadly exposes how hollow the basic template of the series is.

Right: Long-standing *MegaTen* convention Demon-fusing appears in *Soul Hackers*, and is required if you want to beat the later bosses. Demons fall into two complex alignment systems through Chaotic, Neutral and Lawful and Good, Neutral and Evil.





DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Atlus / NIS America (EU)
DEVELOPER: Atlus
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

THE GHOST WITHIN THE MACHINE

Shin Megami Tensei – Devil Summoner: Soul Hackers

If you know the *Shin Megami Tensei* franchise, then you know what to expect from a release inside the main series. If the title is unfamiliar, there are a few key tropes that each and every *MegaTen* game possesses; the ability to coerce demon opponents onto your team through in-battle conversation, bleak philosophies, moral alignments and typical JRPG mathematical battle systems. The 3DS port of *Soul Hackers* contains every one of these facets in a by-the-numbers *MegaTen* game.

The first offering Western players have of the 15-year-old game shows its age on the 3DS – originally a Sega Saturn title, *Soul Hackers* now feels like it struggles to keep up. The port doesn't really utilise the dual screens for any functional purpose other than to display stats of your demons or display a world map when navigating the over-world. The graphics (with additional paltry 3D offerings) are blocky and polygonal – indicative of the game's Nineties origins).

It's pertinent that the gameplay is as consuming as it is, detracting attention from the badly aged aesthetics of the port. There are real-world and cyber-world dungeons to explore in *Soul Hackers*, and while the real-world dungeons tend to be restrained to architecturally brutalist structures in the fictional Japanese city of Amami, the cyberpunk realms inside the Paradigm X software offer some incredible level design. Within the computer, anything is possible, and venturing into the higher-level dungeons of Paradigm X feels like being in the basement of a lively Brighton club in the small hours of the morning.

The story is as tightly knitted as you'd expect from a *Shin Megami Tensei* game, focusing on the technocratic regime within Amami city and the slow descent into cyber-indoctrination. You assume the role of a nameless hacker thrust into a web of conspiracy and subterfuge against your will. It's all fully voice-acted, too, showing the focus the game has on its narrative.

There are extensive levels of micromanagement, and some incredibly deep role-playing mechanics to get your head around, from demon fusion and party management to the vast conversational skills required to recruit more monsters to your cause. There is a *steep* learning curve within *Soul Hackers*, with nothing more than a few arbitrary tutorials providing guidance for newcomers to the series, but if you're after a traditional dungeon-crawling JRPG, replete with all the tropes of the genre, this game will provide a very satisfying experience.

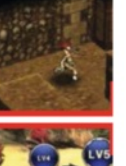
ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

TAKE IT TO THE STREETPASS: One feature the 3DS port makes use of is StreetPass, which is used to grow a virtual pet in-game called Nemechi, who offers you special demons in exchange for StreetPass 'souls' or Play Coins. It's easily the best use of 3DS hardware the game takes advantage of.

BETTER THAN

DOCTOR LAUTREC & THE FORGOTTEN KNIGHTS





FIRE EMBLEM: AWAKENING

WORSE THAN





VERDICT 7/10

A COMPLEX, SOLID JRPG THAT HASN'T AGED TOO GRACEFULLY

SAVING ITS ENERGY FOR THE NBA FINALS

NBA 2K14

Basketball isn't about players simply throwing the ball at the hoop until it goes in. There's a raw physicality in the sport that's often overlooked and that hustle and bustle is something the *NBA 2K* series has honed to perfection, replicating the sweat and hard knocks of its chosen sport better than a *FIFA*, a *Madden*, even an *NHL*. It's that rarest of breeds – a sports game where attacking *and* defending is enjoyable, because it feels like a physical war. *2K14* has ramped up that intensity, with more animations for players being knocked over or throwing shots while teetering off balance. It sounds like a minor addition but it makes a huge difference on the court.

More polarising is that the bulk of the controls have been shifted from the buttons to the right analogue stick, forcing veterans to relearn the game's famous 'shot stick'. It's a bumpy transition. Tapping the stick activates hops and steps while holding the stick shoots. Too often you'll get a shot when you wanted to hop or slide through the defence and vice versa. It's a fantastic system once you become confident with it, allowing the snappy improvisation often demanded in actual basketball, but it's a little too delicate for its own good.

The other significant change is the focus on Lebron James, whose presence hasn't just been bought for the cover but also for the new Path To Greatness mode. This charts Lebron's progress through the NBA title stage of his career, narrated by the man himself. Focusing on key games of each season, there are scenarios Lebron finds himself in with pages of dialogue for commentary to sell the illusion that it's something that could happen – Lebron running the offence when Miami Heat's point guards are out with injury, duelling against Kobe Bryant for the MVP award, dealing with Allen Iverson's comeback in the play-offs and so on.

It's an interesting idea, similar to what EA tried with *Fight Night Champion*, but it's undermined by the lack of player influence. Lose the first game to the Sixers in the play-offs, for example, and you'll still win the series and progress to the next scenario. In theory, it's a mode that could be completed with no input at all.

Outside of that, progress is minimal. MyPlayer remains virtually untouched. It impresses in the same ways as last year, but there's still inconsistency with how performance is graded. Ditto MyTeam, which has only been touched up in the slightest of ways.

In fact, outside of the new animations, it's hard to see where *NBA 2K14* has really advanced ahead of last year's outing. Ironically, this is perhaps the equivalent last year's Miami Heat – all too happy to coast through the regular season knowing the glory of the play-offs is up ahead.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS3
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox 360
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: 2K Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN

NBA LIVE 10

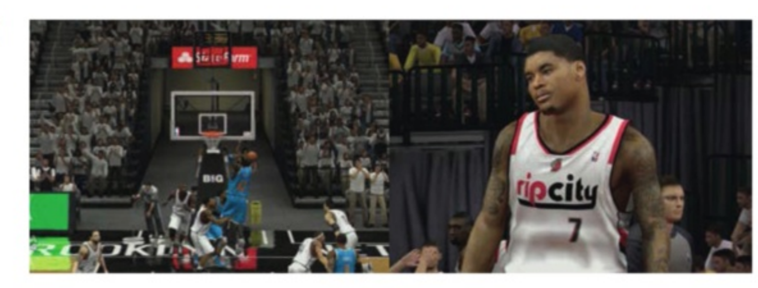




NBA 2K13

WORSE THAN

Below: Online is enjoyable but you'll notice that every player will endlessly attempt three-pointers, making players with high three-point and offensive rebound stats the most valuable in MyTeam mode.



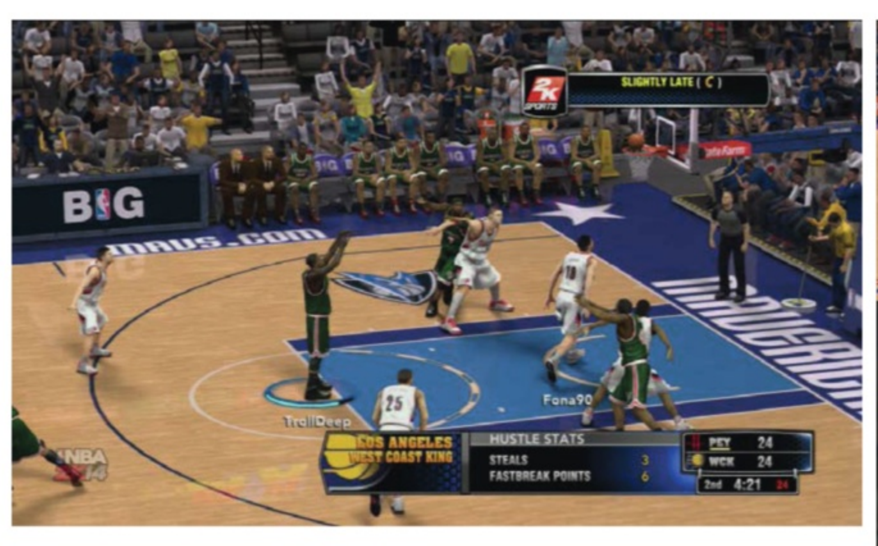
ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

MORE TEAMS: European teams have made it into the series for the first time but without any modes or rules that cater to European basketball, their inclusion feels redundant.

VERDICT 7/10

FANTASTIC BUT DISAPPOINTING FOR LONG-TERM FANS



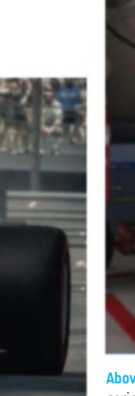


Above: The next-gen versions will offer unprecedented realism, but that's nothing against the current gen edition of *NBA 2K14*, still impressive in its own right.

CLUTCH-ING AT STRAWS. FOR WHEEL

F1 2013





Above: Disconcertingly, your race engineer is a dead-eyed stiff who talks to you as if you've recently suffered a serious brain injury.

With an intro video that consisted of footage of a rain-sodden England – and set to the melancholy strains of Noel Gallagher's *AKA… What a Life!* – last year's official F1 outing was one of the most acutely British games ever made. *F1 2013*, on the other hand, spins into action in a more conventional fashion: Monaco sunsets, a portentous voiceover, a booming Hans Zimmer-like soundtrack. This *is* where history is made. This *is* Formula One.

Sadly, eschewing a suicide-inducing introduction is one of the most significant alterations made to the series this year. Arriving somewhat peculiarly – as is now the routine – towards the end of the F1 season, this latest iteration makes a smart play for the hearts of older racing fans via its brand new Classic Mode. It's a digression that's unashamedly aimed at hardcore F1 acolytes, replete as it is with scuzzy retro filters and intermittent commentary from an 89-year-old Murray Walker. Unfortunately, however, the courses, drivers and cars are all in perilously short supply, so as enjoyable as it briefly is, Classic Mode doesn't take very long to be exposed for what it actually is: a meek and cynical DLC gateway.

The rest of the package is predictably stellar. The series now has the finest tutorial scheme in all of gaming that offers up concise, matter-of-fact information that'll be invaluable to anyone who isn't a certified petrol-head. Need to know when (and why) to deploy KERS? How to use all of your inputs to avoid excess tyre damage? These training stages don't exclude anyone, and even if you're uninterested in F1, you'll enter your first race feeling like a walking encyclopedia.

On-track modifications are minor – competitor AI is more aggressive, it's far harder to tackle sharp corners in the wet – and, much like the sport it depicts, *F1 2013* is not for the impatient. Career Mode's a mammoth undertaking, and if anything the 2012 edition's arduous learning curve is even steeper here. But this is alleviated by what is arguably *2013*'s most meaningful addition: you can now save progress mid-lap.

So the new game is stuck in the same airless quandary as far too many annual series updates. It's unfair to dissuade newcomers from picking it up – it's still excellent – but it's similarly odd to suggest that anyone who owns *F1 2012* has any business nabbing this as well. This is the superior package, but a meagre spread of negligible tweaks and a fleetingly captivating DLC portal simply don't justify the asking price at launch.

VERDICT 7/10
FOR OBSESSIVES AND NEWCOMERS ONLY

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 3
OTHER FORMATS: PC, Xbox 360
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Namco Bandai
DEVELOPER: Codemasters Birmingham
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-6
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

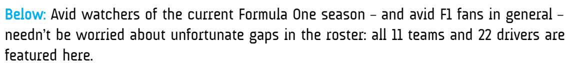
BETTER THAN — F1 2012



WORSE THAN — SUPER MONACO GP

ENHANCED
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

WET WORK: Previously, driving on wet tarmac didn't make a great deal of difference to how each car handled. In *F1 2013* you'll have to work hard to ensure that you don't endlessly lose control on corners.



Below: Avid watchers of the current Formula One season – and avid F1 fans in general – needn't be worried about unfortunate gaps in the roster: all 11 teams and 22 drivers are featured here.







Left: *Rain*'s exclusively blue-grey colour scheme is thematically bleak and oppressive, symbolically relevant to the game's Kafkaesque themes. Everything seems transient and changeable – aptly presented through childish eyes without comment.

THERE'S SOMETHING IN THE WATER

Rain

***Rain* makes no bones as to what its core experience is – install the game, go to the main menu, and you're not offered a 'new game' option, but a 'new story'.** Distracting the player as little as possible with game mechanics, *Rain* is the epitome of bare-bones gaming – an analogue stick and three face buttons are all you need.

Taking up the role of a boy that has gained a ghostly form and doesn't understand his new phantom appearance, you begin to learn how the world works through a series of tutorial levels, cleverly disguised as narrative chapters. The game guides you through its levels by embedding dynamic text into the environment, so as you walk around, you read lines of story on the structures you're passing under or climbing over. This mechanic keeps immersion consistent; as you're working through levels, you're rewarded with verbal content in a game that is otherwise mute.

The dynamic text that appears as you walk through the Parisian-inspired streets in the unnamed city of *Rain* subtly tells you how to take advantage of the water-based mechanics of the game. The player character's phantom form becomes invisible in dry areas, and the only clue to your location in this circumstance are the footprints you leave in your wake. You're only visible in the rain, and you must use the shift between visibility and invisibility to distract enemies or sneak past them – playing as a frightened child, you cannot attack in the game, and the juvenile wonder with which the city is presented feels authentic.

Enemies manifest as phantasmagorias – beasts with elongated limbs and necks: a completely natural fit within the intentionally anonymous continental city. The enemy animations are unnerving and threatening; when attacking, movements become lurching and violent, contrasting against the fluid, languid pace of the rest of the game. Should you fall to one of these monsters, the Game Over screen states 'the children were swallowed by the darkness'. It's upsetting, emotionally blackmailing you.

Despite the premise and innovative rain-based mechanics, the game unfortunately falls short with its puzzle design. While the levels themselves are aesthetically pleasant, the gameplay aspects are sadly rather simple, with the whole game falling into a predictable puzzle/chase, puzzle/chase rhythm. Without the option to deviate from the game's strict path, and with mechanics repeated to the point of exhaustion, *Rain* certainly shows there's room for artistically vibrant properties in games, but that aesthetic shouldn't detract from gameplay.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 3
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Sony Computer Entertainment
DEVELOPER: SCE Japan Studio/Acquire
PRICE: $14.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

AS GOOD AS

LARA CROFT & THE GUARDIAN OF LIGHT



WORSE THAN

LIMBO

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

UNDER THE WEATHER: *Rain* makes the player think about what impact their presence (or lack thereof) will have on the environment and creatures around them. It all feels like a metaphor for childhood loneliness, and it works wonders.



VERDICT 7/10

A UNIQUE PREMISE WITH EFFECTIVE STORYTELLING



Right: The enemies of *Rain* always seem threatening, and seeing a ghostly child mercilessly gored by a phantom dog is horribly unsettling – especially when discordant piano stings accompany each lurching movement

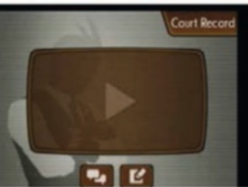


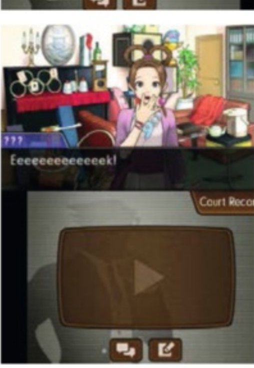


Left: This is Phoenix's new sidekick, Athena Cykes. The necklace allows her to seek out emotions that seem at odds with what a subject may be saying. She's a bit irritating initially, but no judge would fault her enthusiasm.

Left: Phoenix slamming the desk is still a highly stirring narrative device – for better or worse, it's when things gets serious.







WHO NEEDS A LAW DEGREE?

Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney – Dual Destinies

After hurtfully skipping the second *Miles Edgeworth* spin-off, Capcom's daft legal visual novel franchise triumphantly returns to the West. Enhanced by 3D visuals and a frivolous mechanic that adds further colour to the cases of Phoenix Wright, it's an appropriate step up for the first 3DS entry.

Phoenix Wright: Dual Destinies ably skirts between cartoonish *Chuckle Brothers*-like humour and true human darkness, the contradiction of those two extremes now intrinsic to this one-of-a-kind series. It's melodramatic, it's sporadically amusing – and then you're looking at autopsy photos of a victim who's been beaten to death.

The success of a *Phoenix Wright* game generally comes down to storytelling – *Justice For All* is the weakest in the series while *Trials And Tribulations* is the strongest, with the quality of the investigation arc and climactic reveals usually determining whether an episode was actually satisfying. *Dual Destinies* may be the best in the series, script-wise; reveals are perfectly timed, mysteries that play out across multiple cases are delicately fed into the stories and there's a use of genuine logic in the cases, as opposed to some of the impossibly lateral solutions that crept into some DS titles.

It's also perfectly accessible if you've skipped a couple of entries. Phoenix gets a new assistant in the form of Athena Cykes, who comes with a talking necklace used for the only major gameplay addition to the series. To uncover extra info during testimonies, you use this Mood Matrix widget to suss out rogue emotions from the events being recalled. This allows you to build up a fuller view of what happened during the crime, by psychoanalysing those on the stand.

Players jump between both Phoenix Wright and Apollo Justice. The big change is in visuals, of course – this is the first 3D entry in the series, meaning you can examine crime scenes in a 3D space. The animated cutscenes don't really add anything to the story and the bog standard English dubbing pushes *Phoenix Wright* into the realm of cheesy anime that it always had the potential to be. Thankfully, since the cases are still text-based, it means the two remain fairly separate.

An eShop-only release, *Dual Destinies* is the kind of game we fear falling down the cracks and being used as a justification not to release such niche delights over here in future – yet this is absolutely Capcom at its best: clearly governed by the distinctive minds of its creators, addictively structured and not developed by a Western team (*DmC*, the exception). A bit of time between entries has been beneficial for *Phoenix*, too – we were ready for another dose of high-end entertaining legal nonsense, as we expect you will be.

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Capcom
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £19.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

THREE DIMENSIONS: *Dual Destinies* has a 3D style similar to *Ni No Kuni*, in that the character models have a 2D impression about them, which is about the best way Capcom could've handled the transition.

VERDICT 8/10

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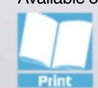


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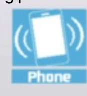
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AGATHA CHRISTIE AND THE DEADLY CASE OF THE POINT-AND-CLICK ADVENTURE

The Raven: Legacy Of A Master Thief

In today's gaming world where heroes are indestructible, have necks the size of your thigh and swear like it's going out of fashion, it's somewhat refreshing to be placed in the regular-sized shoes of a character like Anton Jakob Zellner.

Zellner isn't your typical gaming superhero, being a balding, paunchy police constable who is pushing the wrong side of 50. He has done nothing of note with his life and only has retirement to look forward to. So when he finds himself caught up in a dangerous case that involves the supposedly dead master criminal The Raven, he jumps at the chance to earn his place in the spotlight alongside Nicolas LeGrand, the young inspector who killed The Raven several years earlier.

What follows is a surprisingly well-crafted story that riffs heavily on the works of Agatha Christie – so much so in fact that one of the suspects Zellner interacts with on The Orient Express is the spitting likeness of her. Spread across three chapters, it would be dastardly of us to go into the plot too much – one reason why we're showing no screens from the third chapter – but let us reassure you that it has plenty of clever twists and turns before it reaches its entertaining conclusion. Filled with well-fleshed-out characters, each with their own motives and potentially murky pasts, *The Raven* harks back to the classic point-and-click adventures of old, and while it's occasionally let down by its production values, its well-told story will ensure that the 11-plus hours needed to complete it absolutely fly by.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Mac
ORIGIN: Germany
PUBLISHER: Nordic Games
DEVELOPER: KING Art
PRICE: £20.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MIN SPEC: OS: Windows XP SP3/Vista/7/8 Processor: 2.0 GHz CPU, Memory: 2GB RAM, Graphics: DirectX 9c compatible graphic card with 256 MB RAM PixelShader 3.0, DirectX: 9.0c
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

CHAOS ON DEPONIA





WORSE THAN

THE SECRET OF MONKEY ISLAND: SPECIAL EDITION



Above: One of the most useful objects you have access to is Zellner's notebook. Every single character he interacts with can be found inside and he'll also add key notes that are useful for solving puzzles.

Controls throughout are simple with Zellner interacting with objects via the left mouse button and combining them with other useful items with the right. The puzzles throughout are well thought out, with a hint option in place if you get too stuck. While the vast majority of problems are solved by clicking and manipulating items, there are a few more layered puzzles that range from breaking into a locked office to escaping from a wrecked museum. You'll rarely be stumped, however, enabling you to simply enjoy *The Raven*'s cleverly crafted story.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

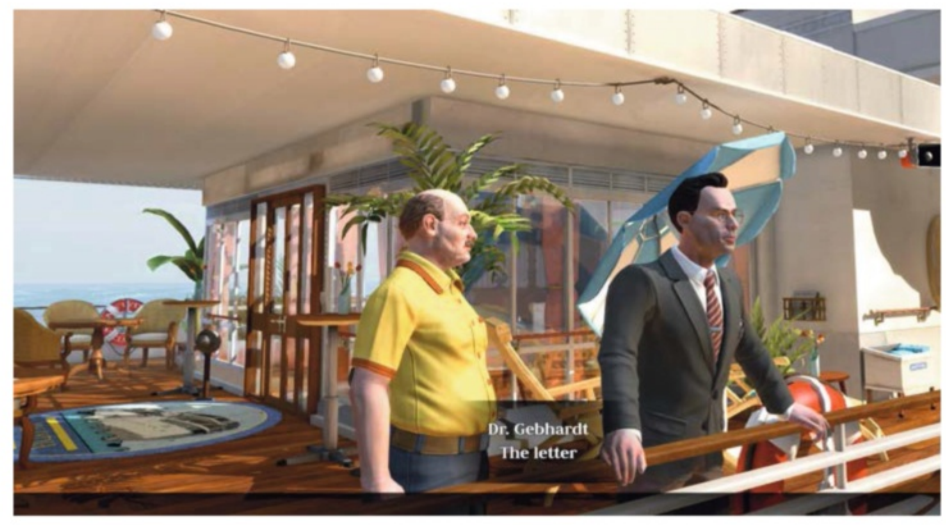
LOCATION, LOCATION: Although there are three chapters, most of the locations from the first two are often reused. While we understand the reasoning behind this, a little more of the game world would have been fascinating to see.

Unfortunately, there are a few issues with *The Raven* that stop it from achieving greatness. The controls occasionally feel clunky, making it hard to move Zellner around, while sometimes he'll simply refuse to walk into a new area. There's also a fair amount of graphical glitching, leaving you in no doubt of its humble origins. You'll also find yourself continually visiting the same few locations throughout the three chapters (although, admittedly, it's cleverly done). Stick with it though, for beneath the plasticine-looking characters and the relatively simple puzzles lies one of the best-crafted stories we've sat through for some time.

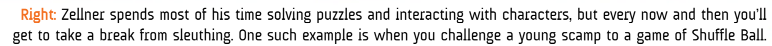


VERDICT 7/10

AN ENJOYABLE STORY THAT REACHES TOO FAR







Right: Zellner spends most of his time solving puzzles and interacting with characters, but every now and then you'll get to take a break from sleuthing. One such example is when you challenge a young scamp to a game of Shuffle Ball.



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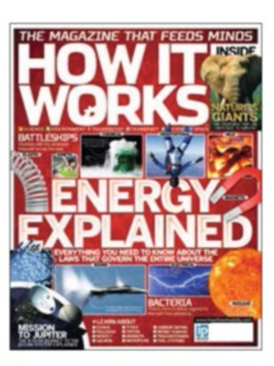
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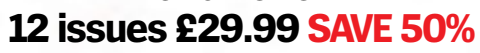


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IF MICHAEL BAY MADE VIDEOGAMES...

Armored Core: Verdict Day

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS3
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox 360
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Namco Bandai
DEVELOPER: From Software
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1 (1-10 online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: No



***Dark Souls* may be infamous for its difficulty, but developer From Software laid down its gaming foundations with the *Armored Core* series way back in 1997.** Since then, *AC* has methodically and strategically evolved itself, tuning up gradually over 15 releases to become the juggernaut that it is today.

Granted, Japanese-style high-action mech shooters aren't for everyone, and *Armored Core: Verdict Day* is a graceless, slow game. Plagued by lethargic loading times and presented with an interface that hates you, *Verdict Day* is a nightmare to navigate.

You'll spend 50 per cent of your time in-game in menus, equipping your mecha-monster with all manner of ridiculous weapons (gun arms are back!) and giving it a paint job worthy of the battlefield. The other 50 per cent of gameplay revolves around trundling around bland, badly textured battlefields blowing up enemy tanks before they blow you up.

The appeal lies in the customisation options, and the complex online battle system. Set up a faction, fill it with human buddies or AI that you can craft yourself (another rich customisation facet) and jump into ten-player arenas. If the region-specific online servers aren't filled, the game offers a Hardcore Mode, replete with the insane difficulty intrinsic to From's game design. From One-Hit Kill mode to Money is Everything, there are a variety of crippling challenges to take on.

If you can overlook the unapologetically monotonous gameplay of the *AC* series in favour of its complex stat-perfecting system and wealth of customisation components, then you'll find *Verdict Day* one of the most rewarding experiences of the series. If not, then the whole game will just feel like firing a gatling gun at a skyscraper until nothing remains but rubble.

VERDICT 6/10
BRINGS A DEEP BUT LABOURED FORMULA CLOSER TO PERFECTION

Below: There are options available to players that want to make their mech their own. We made a metallic monster reminiscent of Optimus Prime, but its stats were just awful.



DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: Poland
PUBLISHER: CI Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £14.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MIN SPECS: Dual Core 2.6 GHz CPU, 512MB GPU, 2GB RAM, 5GB HDD
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



AS MODERN AS DUKE NUKEM

Alien Rage

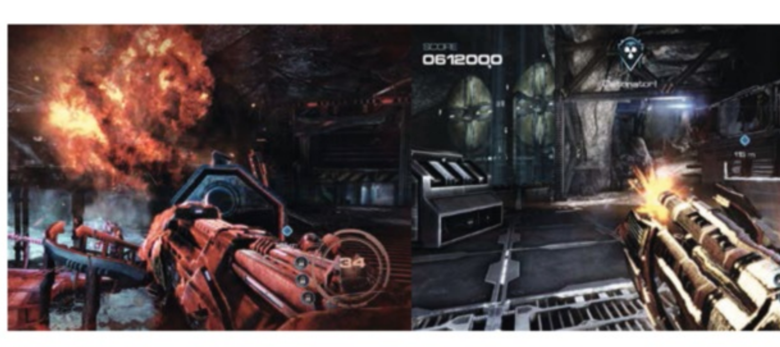
Ever since *Bulletstorm* there's been an upsurge in classic *Doom*-like arcade shooters and that, in itself, is pretty good news for gamers. Crowbarring in a reason to, say, blow up the Eiffel Tower (here's looking at you, *Call Of Duty*) doesn't necessarily make a game better, sometimes it's just enough to watch things explode. As a result, *Alien Rage* should be perfect for those who remember the glory days of gibs and m-m-m-m-monster kills, but, sadly, it's not.

The problem is not even the sudden saturation of silly shooters, either. The problem, in fact, is that *Alien Rage* is just not very good. You'll play a gruff-voiced, man-of-few-words space marine partnered with an ironically personal AI assistant – originally named Iris – and an accompanying cheeky chap who's pretty much there to provide banter.

If that didn't sound woefully generic enough then consider the uninspired alien locations, the critically unvaried enemy types or the fact that every boss fight has already been encountered in every PS2-era beat-'em-up game ever. *Alien Rage* manages at least to *look* like a modern game, but no amount of graphical sheen can hide the fact that you're wading through what is essentially one long lens-flare-filled corridor.

Mechanically, there's a solid enough shooter here. The aiming feels a little bit *too* loose, even for a game designed to re-create the glory days of arcade FPSs, but for the most part it can at least sustain some enjoyment in the gunplay alone. Points and medals are awarded per kill like *Bulletstorm*, but without the creativity while environmental hazards litter each arena just waiting for you to accidentally trigger in a hail of bullets. Of course this should add an element of longevity to each level, but a sense of replayability is completely stunted by the simple fact that *Alien Rage* doesn't do anything to keep you engrossed in the game.

In essence there's nothing actually *wrong* with *Alien Rage*. It works – it's enjoyable enough on a purely mechanical level – but it is so mortally by-the-numbers that you'll genuinely believe you've already played the game before.



Above: It's a fine line that arcade shooters struggle to tread with gratuitous combustion, but when most instances in *Alien Rage* happen unexpectedly it can lose some of the appeal.



VERDICT 5/10
DÉJÀ VU FOR ALL THE WRONG REASONS

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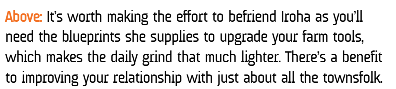




Below: You'll soon learn to arrange your visits to other characters around their own individual routines – if you happen across a villager while they're setting up shop, for example, you'll have to sit through a short but unskippable cutscene each time.







Above: It's worth making the effort to befriend Iroha as you'll need the blueprints she supplies to upgrade your farm tools, which makes the daily grind that much lighter. There's a benefit to improving your relationship with just about all the townsfolk.



IF YOU BUILD IT, THEY WILL COME… EVENTUALLY

Harvest Moon 3D: A New Beginning

Few games capture the Japanese work ethic quite so effectively as *Harvest Moon*, but even by the series' standards, you'll have to get through a lot of hard slog before things start happening. It begins with the world's slowest tutorial, as you follow an old man wandering slowly around an empty settlement, which you're tasked with developing through hours of backbreaking labour.

Your daily tasks begin to feel like little more than chores, while the slow progress and disappointing visuals hardly encourage you to continue. Somehow, this is an uglier game than its DS predecessors, with a flat, washed-out look, an inconsistent frame-rate, and a contender for the worst jump animation ever. That said, having to build up from your meagre shoestring budget in the early game will likely have you sympathising with the developer.

It would be hard to blame less patient players for turning off before the five hour mark, but those who stick with the game through this laborious introduction will find themselves handsomely rewarded. As your village blossoms from the arrival of its first new residents, so too does the game, and in the hours that follow, your daily tasks become a small part of your routine rather than taking up all your time. You're working to live, rather than the other way around.

Sure, you'll still be tending crops, feeding livestock, fishing, and placing sellable items in your shipping bin. But you'll also be making friends and wooing potential spouses, enjoying festivals and so on. None of this is entirely new, of course, but the game gives you clear targets to work towards, and there's genuine satisfaction in achieving those goals. And if *A New Beginning* might still be a rather misleading title, it's perhaps justified by a surprisingly flexible and comprehensive farm-building element. Instead of being stuck with a rigid layout, you can change the position of fences and buildings. In a charming touch, you reposition items by lifting them up over your head and dropping them into place like a pastoral superhero: The Agricultural Hulk, if you will.

You'll be able to customise your avatar as well as your farm, and that personal touch is a big part of the appeal here. Once you've obtained the Harvest Sprites to delegate some of the more tedious processes to, you can spend time enjoying the fruits of your labours and focusing on your own preferred activities, whether it's sharing recipes with townsfolk, spending time with family and pets or expanding your horizons by visiting new places. That sense of freedom and the game's altruistic charm are the reasons why *Harvest Moon* still endures, and if the sluggish opening almost torpedoes the game before it's really started, what follows gives you plenty of reasons to forgive it.

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Zen United
DEVELOPER: Marvelous
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN: HARVEST MOON: ISLANDS OF HAPPINESS



WORSE THAN: HARVEST MOON: FRIENDS OF MINERAL TOWN

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

A NEW BEGINNING: Let's start again, shall we? Either speed up the tutorial, or allow seasoned *Moon* vets to skip it entirely. The early stages shouldn't be easy, but nor should they be quite this tedious and empty.

VERDICT 7/10

LIKEABLE, SUBSTANTIAL, BUT A LITTLE TOO SLOW



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BEHIND THE SCENES

KINGDOM HEARTS

Disney through the prism of a Squaresoft RPG – Kingdom Hearts was a high concept idea that grew into one of Square Enix's most important series. Here, director Tetsuya Nomura grants a rare interview and discusses the background of the 2002 PS2 title…

Released: March 2002 (Japan) November 2002 (EU)
Format: PS2
Publisher: Square
Developer: Squaresoft
Key Staff: Tetsuya Nomura: director, Yoshinori Kitase: producer
Composer: Yoko Shimomura

IT BEGAN IN an elevator. Like those urban legends involving film sets being haunted or actors improvising iconic lines in classic movies, a Disney executive and Square's Shinji Hashimoto, who once operated out of the same complex, supposedly laid the groundwork for the creation of *Kingdom Hearts* in one elevator trip.

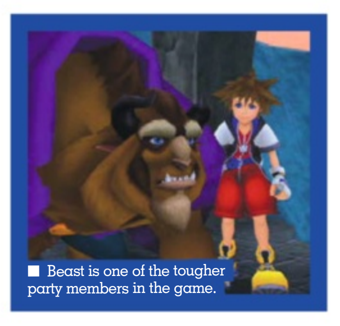
And like any of the best urban legends, some of the details are a bit too fanciful. "The conversation in the elevator was more along the lines of 'It would be great to do something together some time' and was not actually a formal idea proposal," explains the game's director, Tetsuya Nomura. "It all started with Mr [Shinji] Hashimoto and some people at Disney discussing that it would be good to do something together and apparently the idea of making a Mickey Mouse RPG came up in his initial conversations with the heads of development at the time."

Nomura, who is very well known to *Final Fantasy* fans for his distinctive character designs from *Final Fantasy VII, VIII, X* and *XIII*, which undoubtedly influenced an entire generation of Japanese and American developers, relished the challenge of tackling such a treasured intellectual property. "However, this was thought to be quite a difficult prospect and when I heard about it I had already come up with the basic idea for *Kingdom Hearts* so I put my hand up and asked if I could be given responsibility for this project."

Disney actually kicked things off with *Kingdom Hearts* by approaching Square with the idea. One simple elevator conversation soon grew into an ambitious vision of what would be Squaresoft's next big project – the initial idea of a Mickey Mouse RPG evolved into something more conceptual that united many Disney worlds together (with a few original creations) through an overarching narrative.

Nomura received suggestions from others working at Square, while his experience on *Final Fantasy* fed into the structure of the game design. "At the time I was given advice from one of my seniors in the company not to make the story itself too simplistic. I thought that the kind of story development logic with lots of foreshadowing type scenes and mysteries was very much a characteristic of the *Final Fantasy* series and that this would also be a good kind of structure to use for *Kingdom Hearts* as well."

IN KINGDOM HEARTS, young island-dweller Sora, troubled by strange dreams of lingering shadows, travels between Disney lands, encountering many recognisable characters from the films while searching for his missing friends. Some of the locales were obvious choices, like Agrabah from *Aladdin* or the Kingdom of Atlantica from *The Little Mermaid*, yet some nicely eclectic ones fed into the game's scope, too, like *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. Nomura had a philosophy over which environments made the cut. "The main condition for picking worlds was that none of them overlapped in terms of feel or atmosphere so there would be a good variation in the game," says Nomura. "I am particularly fond of the *Nightmare Before Christmas* world (Halloween Town) from the first game. I thought that this would throw


Beast is one of the tougher party members in the game.


Poor Genie, still forced to wear his handcuffs. Clearly Sora just can't let him go.

THAT OLD GANG OF MINE

The notable Final Fantasy cameos of the Kingdom Hearts series to date. Fan service overdose…



CLOUD (FINAL FANTASY VII)

Grumpy as ever, Cloud gets a little bit too close to darkness when he's hired by Hades to batter Hercules. He plays a much bigger role in the sequel.



SEPHIROTH (FINAL FANTASY VII)

Final Fantasy's most iconic villain is a secret battle in both *Kingdom Hearts* games, and he vanishes with Cloud after fighting Sora in *KHII*.



SQUALL (FINAL FANTASY VIII)

Changing his name after letting his home world fall to Leon – Squall's name in *FFVIII* is Squall Leonhart – the *FFVIII* hero helps Sora on his way.



YUFFIE (FINAL FANTASY VII)

The master thief is an optional battle at the Coliseum later in the game, as well as a key part of the Heartless mega-battle in *Kingdom Hearts II*.



YURIPA (FINAL FANTASY X-2)

Final Fantasy X-2's trio of heroines take a break from singing, dancing and being annoying to appear as fairies in *Kingdom Hearts II*'s Hollow Bastion.



ZACK (CRISIS CORE: FINAL FANTASY VII)

An esoteric choice, *FFVII* flashback player Zack appeared in the PSP's *Birth By Sleep* after being killed at the climax of the excellent *Crisis Core*.



NEKU (THE WORLD ENDS WITH YOU)

Okay, not *Final Fantasy*, but it is Square Enix. In last year's 3DS spin-off *Kingdom Hearts 3D*, DS cult hit *TWEWY*'s hero Neku pops up with his co-stars.



AURON (FINAL FANTASY X)

Hip flask-bearing, walking dead warrior Auron climbs out of the Underworld, gives Hades some lip and teams up with Sora, echoing his role in *Final Fantasy X*.

the player a real curveball and surprise them with its inclusion. I am always thinking about doing surprises like that."

Indeed, the sequel would later throw in a gorgeous *Steamboat Willie* level, *Tron* scenario and even one based on the *Pirates Of The Caribbean*. What was interesting about the use of the worlds was the way a mini-storyline played out within each that was faithful to the source. Sora, Donald Duck and Goofy, travelling through each land to connect them together using the hero's mystical Keyblade weapon, were essentially supporting spectators to these well-knit Disney vignettes.

"Sora is supposed to be a Disney-esque character," says Nomura when we ask about the creation of the series' protagonist. "I was very aware of this in his colours, the form of the character and his bright and cheery personality. For the Keyblade I wanted to give him a weapon that had a non-aggressive motif to it so I settled on the idea of a key that also ties in with the story itself."

Nomura didn't feel he had to change his artistic style to make the character designs fit with Disney – at the time, he cited how Donald Duck and Tarzan were visually very different despite being Disney characters, meaning there wasn't too much of a struggle in finding a unifying visual language. "I did not feel any particular difficulties really. For example, in the underwater world there are no characters who swim around wearing regular clothes so to fit with that I simply changed the characters costumes around a bit. It was only really minor adjustments and obvious things like this."

Greater challenges lay in weaving Sora's story around the Disney worlds, however, those relating to Disney's restrictions on how its properties may be used. "Because you are dealing with other people's IPs there are naturally bound to be limits in place and it took some work to get around those so that the player does not feel inhibited by them."

Nomura reflects positively on his experience working with Disney, however. "In working together with Disney I was able to experience things that I could not normally to do in my job," he says, mentioning voice acting as an example. He doesn't discuss what he wasn't allowed to put in



Summons are often best used in the game's harder boss fights later on.


Art direction always determines whether a PS2 game ages well, and *Kingdom Hearts* didn't get a lot wrong by raiding the Disney archives.

WHAT THEY SAID…



Clear a space in your diary and take a trip into Square's world of magic, you won't regret it. Excellent. An engrossing and magical RPG.

Play, 90%
November 2002

the game. "Of course there were things that they would not permit but I can't really talk about those."

Interestingly, Donald Duck and Goofy carry a staff and shield respectively as Disney wouldn't permit them to carry swords, or other violent weaponry. Each property had a set of guidelines and they weren't allowed to add anything that wasn't already in the films – Nomura's team did get permission to adapt the characters for certain worlds after Disney saw the artist's designs for aquatic versions of Donald and Goofy, however, and the *Nightmare Before Christmas* world pushed that transformation into creepier territory. Disney's animators even met with the Squaresoft team to help them understand their process in what were dubbed 'chalk talks'.

THE EFFORT – WHICH saw some of Squaresoft's team watching a wide variety of Disney videos for months in research – paid off. *Kingdom Hearts* is a faithful work that translates the 2D styling of each licence perfectly into 3D, with the delicate animated touches helping make that transition exciting for seasoned filmgoers and fans. *Kingdom Hearts* was a treat for anyone who grew up with stacks of discoloured Disney VHSs beneath their tellies.

In early videos for the game, a Disney castle level appeared to be among the worlds open for exploration – we asked Nomura if it, which appeared in *Kingdom Hearts II*, or anything else, had to be cut from the game. "Essentially I managed to do everything that I wanted to do from the start of that project," Nomura says. "I think that there is a bit of a misunderstanding out there but the footage you talk about of Sora running around the Disney castle was simply early test footage and was not an actual scene that was originally included in the game and then cut out later."

Not that the arc of the game was short on content at about 50 hours in length. Being an action RPG, one of the first to have mainstream appeal, there were plenty of reasons to revisit the worlds, and, with a combat system that gradually grew in complexity, *Kingdom Hearts* always feeds the player with new things to see. Aside from a difficult camera, mapping spells to the face buttons was a workable system, while the option to change the behaviour of your party members, Donald, Goofy and the guest characters on each world, like Beast, Ariel or Peter Pan, offered a good capacity for strategy.

Having three characters in play created a few logistical headaches for the team. "Sora can move freely but the other members have to be able to follow him wherever he goes, so the kind of problems we had are the typical type that you get in this sort of game where they get caught up on objects and can't keep up with the player [and so on]."

A BORROWED STAPLE of *Final Fantasy*, summoned creatures, allowed for even more novel guest appearances, and were manifested in the form of Disney characters like Genie from *Aladdin*, Mushu from *Mulan*, Tinker Bell from *Peter Pan* and Nomura's personal favourite, Simba from *The Lion King*. *Final Fantasy* characters, meanwhile, made significant appearances throughout the story. Nomura explains how that came to be. "Basically we needed to have NPC characters to fill the worlds that were original designs and did not have Disney motifs and if those characters were also new original characters they would not leave such an impression on the player so I decided to have *Final Fantasy* characters as guest stars."

DISNEY'S ANIMATORS MET WITH THE TEAM FOR WHAT WERE DUBBED 'CHALK TALKS'

Characters from *FFVII*, *VIII* and *X* all appeared in a variety of capacities (see 'That Old Gang Of Mine'). It was a fairly curious choice when you considered that grumpy *FFVIII* River Phoenix-inspired Squall essentially lived round the corner



■ Forking out for the right voice actors made sure *Kingdom Hearts* was viewed on a higher level than a typical tie-in.





If you like Square, or if you like Disney, or if you'd just like to check out an impressive action RPG, Kingdom Hearts should be top of your list this fall.

IGN, 9.0/10
September 2002

from duck triplets Huey, Dewey and Louie, but this sort of contrast is something that fans of the series responded positively to; interestingly, all the characters chosen were ones that only Nomura himself had designed, with pre-*FFVI* figures left alone (though in *Kingdom Hearts II*, the inclusion of Vivi from the non-Nomura *IX* expanded that remit a little).

In many cases, too, they'd received an extensive redesign from Nomura and were voiced for the very first time. Some of the casting choices were interesting, others contentious; David Boreanaz, known best for his role as Angel in *Buffy* and its spin-off at the time, voiced the similarly characterised Squall. 'N Sync's Lance Bass had the role of Sephiroth (he was replaced in the sequel), singer Mandy Moore played Aerith and US soap actor Steve Burton arguably put in the strongest work with his moody rendition of Cloud, which led to him reprising the role in *FFVII* movie *Advent Children* and six subsequent games.

"I felt that if we had lots of new original characters it would take time until they were all recognised and wanted for the player to be aware of the protagonist Sora first and foremost here," Nomura explains. But really, aiming so high with the casting was just conducive to one of *Kingdom Hearts'* goals overall, to tackle the various Disney licences with industry-best production values. In terms of voice actors, that credibility spread to James Woods reprising his role as Hades, Gilbert Gottfried tackling Iago from *Aladdin* and *The Simpsons'* Dan Castellaneta doing a fine impression of Robin Williams' Genie. Many of the original actors from the films returned to join the game's massive cast.

It's easy to be cynical about a product as relentlessly corporate on the surface as *Kingdom Hearts*, yet there were more than a few memorable curios in the design, too. Gummi ships, essentially a way to travel between each world through tunnels of enemies, were essentially Lego spacecraft that the player could completely customise in colour and composition. Nomura explains their origins. "I personally really like toy building blocks and wanted to find a way to include them in the game. I was once

FINAL FANTASY IS LIKE A TOYBOX... I CARRIED THAT PHILOSOPHY INTO KINGDOM HEARTS

told that a core principle for developing *Final Fantasy* was that *Final Fantasy* is like a toybox in that it has so many different cool things packed into it and I carried that philosophy over into *Kingdom Hearts* as well. So I decided to use building blocks and also incorporate a shooting game style section." That creativity stretched to narrative design through gameplay, as well. One of the smarter moments of the story sees Sora lose his Keyblade weapon to rival Riku, with Donald and Goofy abandoning the character, too, acting like the treacherous anthropomorphs they are. What happens instead is that players team up with a dejected Beast (from *Beauty & The Beast* fame), with Sora stuck with a wooden sword that does no damage to enemies.

THIS REMOVAL OF power changes the dynamic of *Kingdom Hearts* completely – and its purpose was for the peaceful characterisation of the game's hero, according to Nomura, who reflects fondly on the decision to do this. "I wanted to make the player aware that their character is not an all-powerful hero but is actually just a regular boy," he says. "This scene was put in so that the player would be made aware of the fact that Sora can only fight when taking up the special Keyblade and when aided by his friends, not just through the back story but in the actual gameplay as well."

Some of the post-game content was inspired, too – a boss fight with the Ice Titan from *Hercules*, and, much like the Dark Aeons from *Final Fantasy X*, some fairly nasty bosses waiting for Sora upon returning to Big Ben in Neverland and the desert outside Agrabah. But the best inclusion? Sephiroth from *Final Fantasy VII*, who arrives out of the sky in a dramatic fashion, before an instrumental rendition of *One-Winged Angel* kicks off a ludicrously hard encounter. "I wanted to have a hidden boss that you could fight after clearing the main game and thought that a very surprising character would be good for this so I decided to use Sephiroth who had not been seen since the original *FFVII* and was well known among fans," says Nomura when we ask him about one of the series' nastiest antagonists. "Sephiroth is also perceived as being a very strong opponent so I thought he fit very well in this role."

Final Fantasy fans would seek out *Kingdom Hearts*, then, for that purpose, yet *Kingdom Hearts* also successfully drew in Disney fans who had never played a Squaresoft RPG before. If you need any better measure of the franchise's success, *Kingdom Hearts II* outsold *Final Fantasy XII* in North America, hence why the third title in the series, announced by Square Enix at E3 an obscene seven years after the second game was released, is of massive importance to a company that's had recent financial struggles.

For the 2013 rerelease, *Kingdom Hearts 1.5 HD ReMix*, Nomura's intention is to pick up new fans as the third instalment lingers on release schedule for the next however many years. "The 'Dark Seekers' story arc will reach its conclusion in the upcoming *Kingdom Hearts III* and this HD remake version is being done with that situation very much in mind. So personally I feel more that this is being made for the sake of the next new chapter than to revisit something old…I really want for as many people as possible to play *KHIII* when it comes out so I made *1.5* with that in mind."

Porting it wasn't an easy task, with many of the PS2 assets sadly being elusive. "The original data no longer existed so it was hard, yes, but despite that, I think that the supreme effort put in by all of the staff on the team stopped it feeling so tricky. Even when comparing it to other HD remakes of other titles I really feel that the *Kingdom Hearts* staff gave a huge amount of effort."

Kingdom Hearts remains the best in the series –the original presented players with unambiguous forces of light and dark, of nostalgia for Disney's strongest animated works and a nicely absurd slice of indulgence for Square's fans. A game that began life in an elevator – an appropriately odd origin for such a bizarre and beloved title.

DISNEY WORLDS

The five greatest Kingdom Hearts Disney levels



AGRABAH

With the streets of Agrabah to explore, Aladdin's admittedly roomy abode and the Cave Of Secrets in the deserts, Squaresoft successfully captured the sense of mysticism that underscores the setting of Disney's Nineties animated hit.



DEEP JUNGLE

From Disney's *Tarzan*, and story-wise, probably the best adaptation of its respective movie's plot, Deep Jungle is one part ground-level jungle and another part kingdom in the tall trees, complete with vine-swinging and peaceful monkeys.



ATLANTICA

With secret tunnels you can't initially access and the largest areas to explore, Atlantica is extremely well-realised. It helps that *Under The Sea* is playing constantly, and that the final battle with a gigantic Ursula is one of the best in the game.



HALLOWEEN TOWN

A rather sinister contrast to the rest of the game, *Kingdom Hearts*' art style adapted very well to *The Nightmare Before Christmas*' stop motion visuals. It's one of the oddest locations in the game, culminating with a fight against a castle-sized Oogie Boogie.



NEVERLAND

Captain Hook's ship isn't an especially exciting interior to explore, but get on deck and it's more interesting, with scraps against large Heartless masquerading as pirate boats. The highlight, though, quite easily, is flying around the *Peter Pan* version of Big Ben.





BEST INTRO

GOLDENEYE 007

N64 **1997**

■ THE SNIPER rifle in the tower. The secret island off the coast of the dock. Bungee jumping off the dam. *GoldenEye*'s opening level is fast, packed and a thrilling introduction to Rare's FPS masterpiece, which dissected every scene of the Brosnan Bond film *GoldenEye* and extrapolated them into entire sprawling levels. For example – the dam part of the *GoldenEye* film just involves Bond running up to a ledge with a bungee rope, jumping off and meeting up with Sean Bean in the facility (which also lasts for about three minutes in the film). That's the magic of *GoldenEye*, though – the odd embellishments turned into iconic setpieces, the distinctive flavour of an FPS that adds about 80% of new stuff to the source material and captures the experience of being Bond perfectly.





INTERVIEW

JULIAN GOLLOP

The X-COM creator discusses late-night coding on his ZX81, dropping out of college to make games and trying to compete with Civilization

Julian Gollop has long been considered one of the foremost creators of strategy games. It's not entirely unsurprising given his early passion for designing and creating board games, and later finding his designs had a place on early home computers. After a slew of well-received titles in the form of *Time Lords*, *Islandia* and – especially so – *Chaos*, Gollop found himself partnering with Microprose, the prestigious publisher renowned for some of the most popular strategy games, including *Civilization*. Featuring smart business decisions – from selling mail-order expansion packs to looking for the right partner for his games – and ambitious ideas, Gollop's career is a long and prestigious one, if nothing else for the impact *X-COM* has had on tactical strategy games since.

How did you first get into game development? Was there any particular influence that pushed you towards the industry?

Well first I was interested in board games and spent a lot of time creating those, but once these home computers started coming out I saw that they could be used to implement some of my board game ideas and you could actually create an artificial intelligence to play against. But home computers at the time were expensive and the Sharp MZ-80K was well over £500 and so it wasn't until I think the BBC Model computer came out. And a friend, Andy Green, he programmed my first computer game design, which was called *Time Lords*. It began as a pen and paper game that required a games master to generate this universe where you had five different worlds and 15 game zones and the players would explore these game zones changing time. We implemented this on BBC Model B and it was published by Red Shift, and it was my first published computer game.

How did the publishing deal with Red Shift come about?

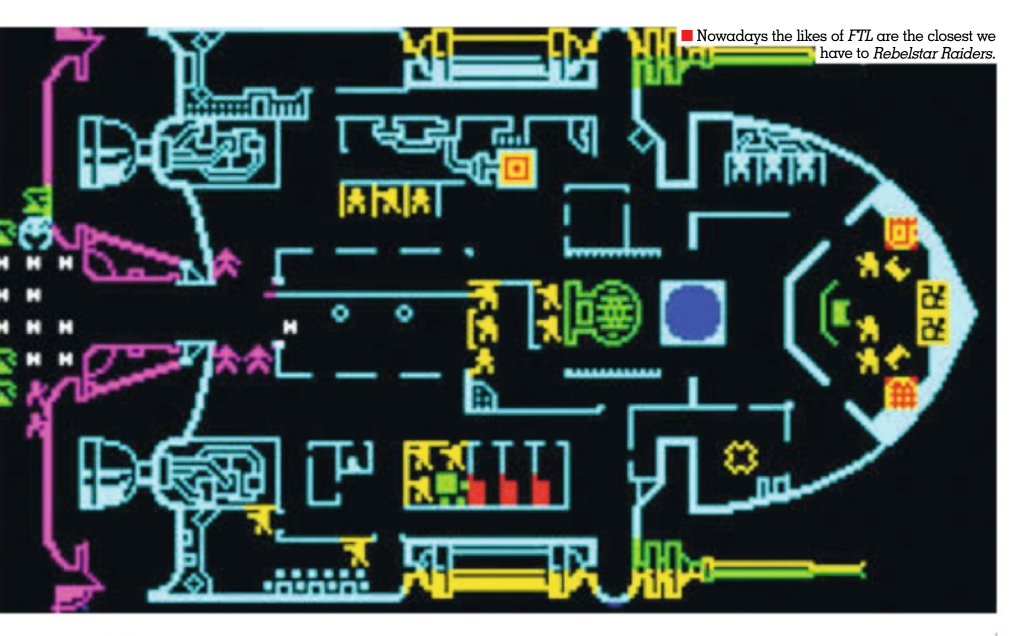
Red Shift was set up by a group of friends; they were a bit older than me because I was still at school at the time. They all came from the tabletop wargaming hobby area and I think Red Shift was set up by a guy who had a tabletop wargaming magazine. One of the first games they published was actually an adaptation of a Games Workshop game called *Apocalypse*, and *Time Lords* was their first original game published. It was produced in a little plastic bag with a card insert and a tape cassette, it was pretty primitive. The game itself looked a little bit like a spreadsheet, and there aren't many screenshots of it around these days.

> **MICROPROSE WANTED A 'BIG GAME', NOT JUST A LASER SQUAD 2 BUT SOMETHING THAT WOULD MATCH CIVILIZATION IN SCOPE**

Laser Squad was one of the first games the Gollop brothers attempted to release on multiple platforms at once.

X-COM, as we know, was Gollop's biggest success and remains popular to this day.

Islandia was one of the earliest examples of what we now know as the 4X genre.



■ Nowadays the likes of *FTL* are the closest we have to *Rebelstar Raiders*.

What was the first computer that you programmed for yourself?

My first computer was a Spectrum ZX81. I bought that from a friend at school for about £25 and I learnt programming on it and my obsession was to create games on it. I used to wait until the rest of the family were asleep and sneak into the living room, plug my ZX81 into the TV and code for the next couple of hours until two o'clock in the morning and try to wake up for school the next day a bit bleary-eyed, but I thought it was amazing.

Were you still driven by making board games, or was this new medium now more interesting to you?

No, I wanted to make games and I saw programming a fantastic tool to enable me to do this. When I learnt programming on the ZX81 I just felt like it was absolutely amazing that I had this awesome power at my fingertips to create stuff. It was about creating games; programming was just a means to the end.

With you being so young, how did you come into this deal with Red Shift?

It was just happenstance. I sort of joined Red Shift as an employee. There were a few other guys also working on games for BBC Model B and Spectrum, and that's what I did. I had year off before going to university and I made *Nebula* and *Rebelstar Raiders* for Red Shift, but Red Shift collapsed – or rather we all left Red Shift, I should say, because the finances were being sucked out of it – before my next game *Chaos* could come out. We did a deal with Games Workshop for a number of games and *Chaos* was one of the games that was involved in that deal and Games Workshop were just considering getting into computer games publishing, so they hadn't done anything by that stage.

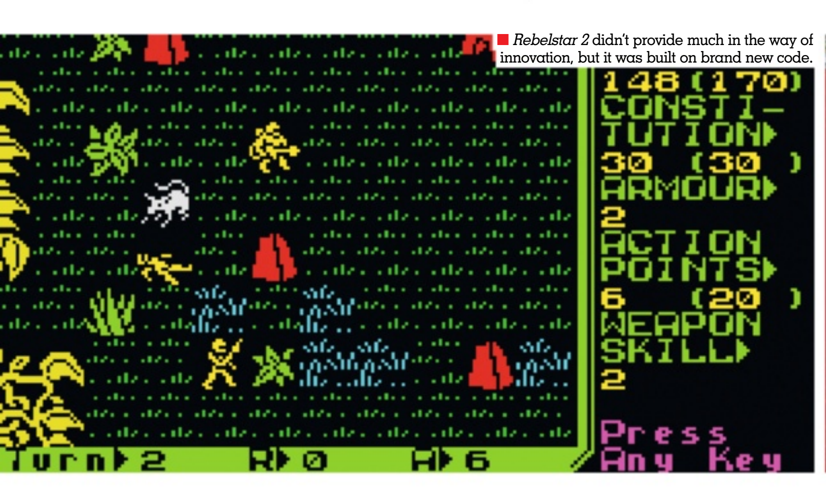
It must've been exciting working with Games Workshop as a board game fan?

Well to be honest at the time when I was working on *Chaos* it was kind of getting in the way of my college work and really just wanted to get the game finished at that stage. I just thought of it as just another deal, you know I was getting paid some money for it, not exactly a royalty. I can't even remember how much I was being paid. It was just a deal the guys did with Games Workshop, I should've tried to go independent and negotiate my contract but I guess I wasn't that interested in the business side and just wanted to make the game.

I thought it was pretty cool that Games Workshop was publishing it, but I kind of realised I had to get back into my college studies and I just needed to finish the game. I had been working on it for quite a while actually. It was quite a long project because it was relatively ambitious. It was my first game in assembly language and it had its own AI in it.

What was it like being a part of this burgeoning industry? Did you realise how important games were becoming?

Well I did realise it was an exciting movement early on when I started to see some interesting games which I thought were very inspiring both technically and gameplay-wise, starting with maybe *Manic Miner* and then the Ultimate Play The Games on the Spectrum. A couple of games there that were influential to me were *Knight Lore* with its amazing isometric 3D graphics system, *Atic Atac* with its cool dungeon-esque gameplay and *Lords Of Midnight* was just this amazingly huge game on a small 48k Spectrum. I realised there was huge potential there, but because I took a break by going to college I guess I missed out on some of the things I could've been doing. But I soon realised I wanted to get back into games and I starting work on *Rebelstar Raiders* and I took a demo to Mirrorsoft



■ *Rebelstar 2* didn't provide much in the way of innovation, but it was built on brand new code.



because they were literally based a mile away from my hall of residence.

How did you proceed, knowing that games were what you wanted to work on?
Mirrorsoft published *Rebelstar Raiders* for which I'd receive a royalty of ten pence per copy, but the game sold pretty well. I think my first royalty cheque for the first month of sales was over £6,000 so it had sold 60,000 copies. I know it doesn't sound a lot these days, but those days it wasn't a small amount. I realised that my college education was failing and I needed to get back into games more seriously, so I dropped out of college and went back to Harlow to set up my own games development and publishing company, which I did with a friend and my dad. I started to work on *Laser Squad*, which was our first published game with Blade Software.

You must've had some difficulties as a three-man team with little knowledge of the industry?
Though we were earning money, we didn't have enough to do any marketing or advertising. We thought that it would be good for us to get a publisher, because at least then the publisher could promote the game a bit better and also help us with some of the conversions to the 16-bit formats.

Was the change to having a publisher a positive move?
It was pretty smooth sailing at the start. We made *Laser Squad*; it has a nice box because they paid for manufacturing, a better box, better artwork and a better manual. We still had our coupons in the back of the manual for expansion kits, which we sold directly, which was part of our deal so the publisher didn't get any money from that. But after we completed *Lords Of Chaos*, Blade Software were having some financial problems and we weren't getting paid all our royalties, so we realised that we needed to find a new publisher and that we would actually put some time into figuring out who it was going to be.

This was when you started on *Laser Squad 2*, which became *X-COM*?
Yeah, we drew up a list of publishers and top of the list was Microprose because of their reputation for strategy games – I think *Civilization* had just come out. And also because we wanted to get into developing games for the PC, because we thought – and particularly in the strategy games market – that PC would become dominant because that was the main platform in America where strategy games sold well. We didn't think they would be interested, but they were our favourite one to approach.

> I USED TO WAIT UNTIL THE REST OF THE FAMILY WERE ASLEEP AND SNEAK INTO THE LIVING ROOM, PLUG MY ZX81 INTO THE TV AND CODE FOR THE NEXT COUPLE OF HOURS



X-COM: Apocalypse was based on a *Judge Dredd* game Gollop had the idea for years earlier.


Lords Of Chaos utilised similar mechanics to *Laser Squad*, in a fantasy setting.

So you were quite tactical about who you wanted to partner with?
At that point we were, yes. We wanted to do PC, we wanted to go with a company that had good reach in America and a reputation for strategy games.

How did *Laser Squad 2* become *X-COM*?
We went to Microprose with the demo in Chipping Sodbury and I showed it to them. They eventually came back to us and said 'Well, look what we really need is something a bit more expansive. Something which is going to compete with *Civilization*, something that's got a research tree, something like a Civilopedia and that [has] multiple battles you can fight'. Pete Moreland, who was head of internal development at Microprose, said that they wanted a 'big game', not just a *Laser Squad 2* but something that would match *Civilization* in scope. It was extremely ambitious for us because at that stage we hadn't even programmed a PC game let alone such an extensive and huge PC game.

How big was your team at the time?
That was just me and Nick [Gollop, Julian's brother]. There were just two of us.

Did the project take a dramatic shift? Were you happy with any changes?
It was much better for it on the whole. The combat was largely unchanged, it was pretty much the same as the demo we had for *Laser Squad 2*, but there was a much greater scale to it. At the time we only had a handful of alien types and Microprose wanted much more. I remember going to the art department and picking out the different sprites being worked on there, and that increased our alien variety much more.

***X-COM* was a huge success, was it now about the computer games or still a means of creating digital 'board' games?**
I didn't see the distinction. I saw them as computer games but I was strongly influenced by board games. I didn't see this great divide; I didn't really make that distinction. These were games to me and I just wanted to make games.



GAME CHANGERS

SPACE INVADERS

Released: 1978 **Publisher:** Taito **Developer:** In-house **System:** Arcade



The *Space Invaders* IP is technically owned by Square Enix today, since the Japanese corporation purchased a majority share in Taito in 2005.

It conquered the arcades in the Seventies and Eighties and invented a genre, but Space Invaders also became an axiom for creative engineering

THERE'S AN EXPRESSION often overused throughout videogame critique pointing towards an elusive '*Citizen Kane* moment'; a phrase that, despite its opaque and unashamedly extraneous nature, insinuates rather prophetically that – in a similar fashion to Orson Welles' seminal motion picture – *one* videogame will define its medium as a serious platform for both technical excellence and creative expressionism. Now, we're not here to debate whether such a thing exists or not, but there's clearly a flagrant injustice highlighted by the very idea that the industry is *still* to this day anticipating such a moment to arrive when it has arguably already passed. *Space Invaders*, a title that debuted 35 years ago in Japan, was a bold, innovative and immensely influential title that not only laid the groundwork for some of the most important industry developments to date, but to this day remains one of the purest, most enriching pieces of software ever created. It did then, as it still does now, perfectly encapsulate the iconic nature symbolised by that aforementioned hoary phrase.

When *Space Invaders* arrived in arcades back in the late Seventies, it's fair to say that no one had ever seen anything quite like it before. Arcades were teeming with cabinets that displayed a variety of experiences rooted in reality: sport simulators, racing games and the occasional Western showdown, each either tangible or derivative in some way or another. Initially creator Tomohiro Nishikado envisioned players fending off waves of tanks, warplanes and soldiers, but soon a more fantastical approach replaced the war theme – due in part to the questionable taste of exterminating waves of people, not to mention the sudden popularity in 1977 of space movies like *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters Of The Third Kind* in the US. The idea of an alien onslaught captured the imagination of the public like nothing else, maybe because it explored a generation's pervasive paranoia, fear of invasion from a superior militant force and fascination with the stars, or maybe it was just because it was, unlike the majority of coin-ops of the time, original. Beyond its rudimental presentation, it was thematic in its

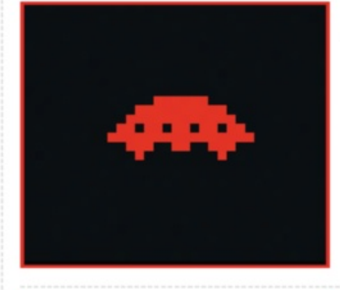
HOW IT INVADED PLANET EARTH

THE REASONS WHY SPACE INVADERS BECAME A PHENOMENON



INNOVATION

★ There was nothing like *Space Invaders* at the time of its release. It presented several fresh gameplay ideas, a sense of the fantastical and even packed in a narrative in some form. Up until that point, most gamers were used to playing racing or sports games.



CONTROVERSY

★ One accolade that mostly goes ignored by *Space Invaders* is the amount of controversy it courted after its release in the US. Newspapers ran stories about penny-pinching children, zombified youth and health issues all caused by the game. It all sounds awfully familiar…



HIGH SCORE

★ People lined up for hours for a chance to play *Space Invaders*, which is in some part due to the implementation of a scoreboard. Everyone wanted to get their name etched on the high score leaderboard. An event held by Atari in New York attracted 4,000 people in 1981.



BRANDING

★ There was something about the detailed characters that helped launch *Space Invaders* to global dominance. The extra-terrestrials and classic spaceship design spawned waves of merchandise that proved a hit in the Seventies and Eighties and chic enough for retro enthusiasts decades later.

structure with an inherent tension borne by its keen design choices. It wasn't the first game to be set in the outer reaches of the universe, but it was one of the first to understand the excitement that can be drawn from looking beyond the realm of plausibility and how the medium can utilise story effectively without compromising urgency.

■■■ MUCH OF ITS success is down to the gameplay design as it is the choice of theme, or rather how they both naturally complement one another. *Spacewar!* may predate it, but *Space Invaders* ultimately birthed the shoot-'em-up genre as we know it. Enemies falling down the screen, the player having to repel their attack with weapons, clearing the screen to progress to the next stage. It's a template that would be adapted by other arcade classics like *Galaxian*, *Phoenix*, *1942*, *Xevious* and *Galaga*, to name a few, and latterly inspire more modern examples like *Blazing Lazers*, *Raiden*, *Radiant Silvergun*, and *Ikaruga*. Oh, and then it was more-or-less adapted into the horizontal-scrolling space shooters like *Gradius* and *R-Type*. And if that's not enough, indulge us for a moment as we rattle off a few of the notable features Taito's title pioneered: it was the first arcade game where the in-game targets return fire at the player, it introduced the idea of assigning a number of lives to the player and it also popularised the concept of achieving a high score – not only that, but it was the first game that actually recorded scores to its internal memory.

It's impossible to over-emphasise how important the latter point was in both *Space Invaders*' success and its ensuing legacy. That notion of competition spurred a generation to gather around the hum of the CRT screen and compete for a place on a scoreboard, to pour coin after coin into the mechanism for another opportunity to prove their resolve and their prowess; it was a way for players to create a legacy.

The sense of community for anyone old enough to remember was infectious, rallying together around a cabinet that offered an unlimited challenge. The difficulty increase, the open-ended nature of the gameplay and the constant beckoning of the scoreboard drove players – in fact, the world – into a frenzy.

Alas, the arcade may slowly be dying – its darkened halls replaced over the years by living rooms and later fibre-optic broadband – but the ideas *Space Invaders* presented still burn bright. It didn't take long for it to invade home consoles (turning the fortunes around on the Atari 2600) and that's where it continues to stay. And while the original has been adapted, remade and reinvented multiple times over the years to varying degrees of success, it's impact is embedded in today's most lucrative franchises, celebrated indie darlings and experimental curios, so sprawling and multifarious to even attempt listing, that continue to pass on its legacy. A *Citizen Kane* moment may be a fallacy, but a *Space Invaders* one we can all believe in.

SPACE INVADERS ULTIMATELY BIRTHED THE SHOOT-'EM-UP GENRE AS WE KNOW IT

KEY FACTS

- It's rumoured that the arcade version of the game was responsible for Japan's coin shortage during its time of release.
- The Atari 2600 port of *Space Raiders* was the first home licence of a coin-op game.
- Being a good port, it was one of the Atari 2600's killer app releases and helped shift millions of consoles following the game's home release in 1980.
- *Space Invaders* introduced international markets to Japanese videogames. Previously Midway, Atari and Exidy ruled the videogaming roost.

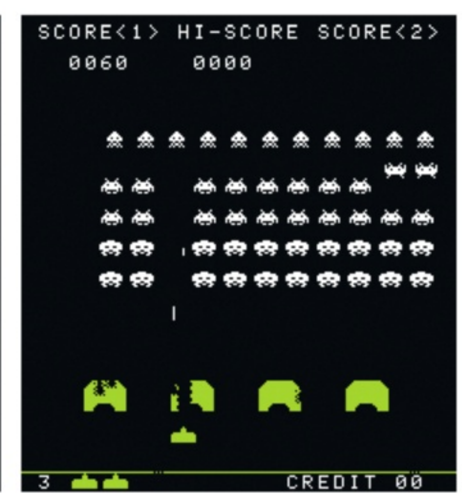


THE INVASION
CHARTING THE EVOLUTION OF SPACE INVADERS IN ARCADES OVER THE YEARS

DEBUTING IN 1978, SPACE INVADERS HASN'T REALLY LEFT ARCADES IN THE YEARS SINCE. WE TAKE A LOOK AT EACH ARCADE RELEASE IN THE FRANCHISE'S 35-YEAR HISTORY







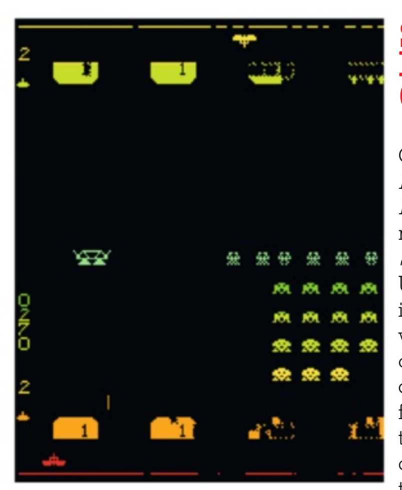
SPACE INVADERS
1978

The original is still the best in the series with its addictive gameplay and vibrant visual staples. As we've spent the last page discussing, it pioneered modern game design to such an extent that its ideas are still prevalent today and it has been attributed with transforming the industry as a whole from a novelty into a global industry. Remarkable really, when you consider it's all the work of one man.



SPACE INVADERS PART II
1979

Released just a year later than the original *Space Invaders*, *Space Invaders Part II* is almost identical to its predecessor aside from the more colourful visuals and slightly modified gameplay. One example is the two different flying saucer types, while there are also some variations on enemy behaviour once you manage to progress past the first wave of aliens – invaders that split into two and flying saucers that drop alien reinforcements to further exacerbate proceedings.



SPACE INVADERS II (MIDWAY)
1980

Confusingly titled *Space Invaders II* – after *Space Invaders Part II* was released as *Deluxe Space Invaders* in the US – this cocktail-table iteration of the original was released in the US only. Developed in-house at Midway, it contains the first two-player mode in the series; where players can fight off alien waves together, while also trying to eviscerate each other simultaneously. A superb twist on the formula, the cabinet has been underrated in the years since (probably due to its rarity).



RETURN OF THE INVADERS
1985

A massive leap visually for the franchise, *Return Of The Invaders* added highly detailed backdrops and superior aliens alongside improvements to AI (circling aliens!) and new challenge stages. It's moderately successful, but not all of the new ideas implemented work quite as well, or gel as seamlessly, as anything in *Space Invaders*. Nevertheless, it was the first major advancement for the series and an indication that Taito was interested in progressing the gameplay of the original.



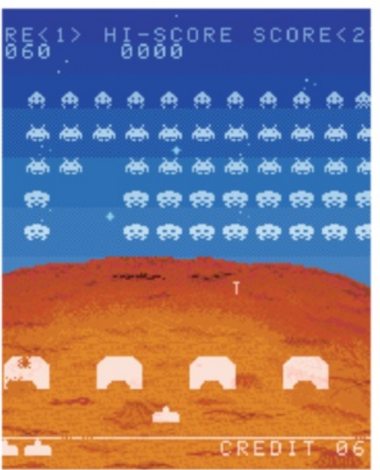
SUPER SPACE INVADERS '91
1990

Perhaps the most fondly remembered entry in the franchise aside from the original, *Super Space Invaders '91* introduced power-ups, bosses and some offbeat challenge stages alongside a visual buff. The highlight is the cattle mutilation stage, wherein players have to protect a herd of cattle from alien attackers, before carrying the harassed bovine off to safety. Taito wouldn't shy away from humour in later instalments, but this is by far the most amusing scenario presented in any *Space Invaders* title to date.



MININVADERS
1990

Featuring precisely the same gameplay and similar black and white visuals to the original *Space Invaders*, there's nothing to really distinguish this arcade entry from Taito's 1978 release. Well, in fact there's quite a simple reason for that: *Mininvaders* was created by the developer purely for use as a test board for other coin-op cabinets that were in production. It also only appeared in Japan and was bereft of any audio output or scoring system, making for a unique yet dull affair.



SPACE INVADERS DX
1993

A fully-fleshed remake of the original boasting a range of modes (including a colour overlay version that is purposely out of alignment for fidelity's sake), it implemented a multitude of features that had appeared throughout the series in the years since the franchise debuted in 1978. However, it's most notable for introducing a parody mode that replaced the traditional *Space Invaders* sprites with characters from other classic Taito games including *Bubble Bobble*, *The New Zealand Story* and *Darius*.



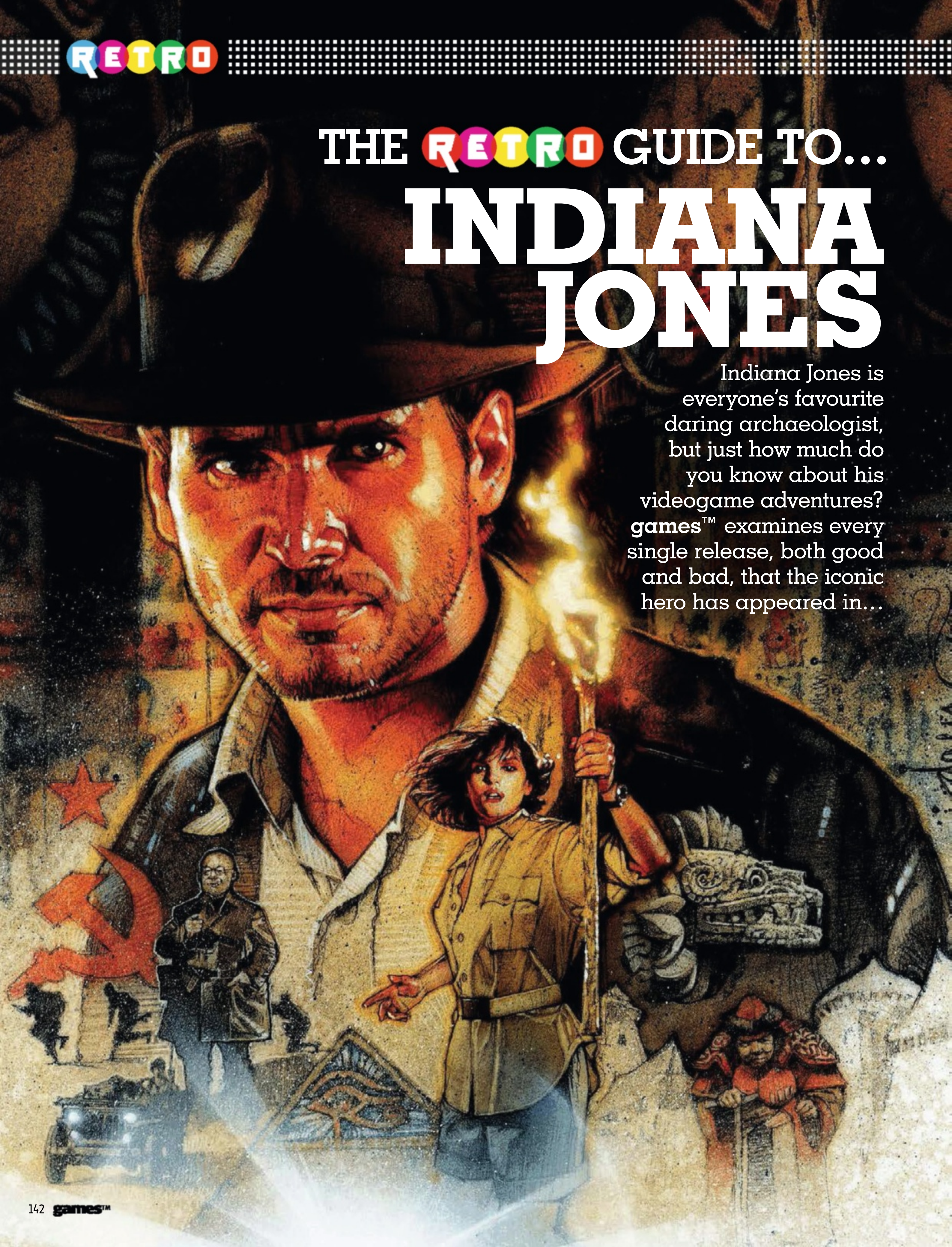
SPACE INVADERS '95
1995

A departure from the more grounded visual design of previous instalments, this 1995 edition instead embraces a vibrant, cartoony aesthetic that paints the alien life forms as joyful little creatures dancing merrily towards their extermination – no doubt in a bid to skew younger (it was also subtitled *The Attack Of Lunar Loonies* in the US). Given the new art style, the use of other Taito characters (much like *Space Invaders DX*) was once again included, this time adding in the likes of Silver Hawks.



SPACE INVADERS: THE BEAT ATTACKER
2003

After a gap of 13 years, *Space Invaders* returned to the arcades in rather stylish form. Lifting its concept from arcade rhythm-action titles like *Dance Dance Revolution*, players wield a turret by stepping on three floor-mounted control panels to fire shots at aliens. Ultimately, it's a more streamlined interpretation of the original, but the innovation is in the unusual controls and it's one of the few examples of the franchise branching out to attempt something unique.



THE RETRO GUIDE TO…

INDIANA JONES

Indiana Jones is everyone's favourite daring archaeologist, but just how much do you know about his videogame adventures? **games**™ examines every single release, both good and bad, that the iconic hero has appeared in…

HARRISON FORD'S ONSCREEN exploits as Indiana Jones helped turn him into one of the biggest movie icons of the Eighties. Indy also turned out to be perfectly at home on the small screen, with a large number of developers, from Atari to LucasArts, eager to evoke his escapades for a whole generation of gamers. While his digital adventures haven't always been as successful as his cinematic ones, they cover a wide range of genres – from coin-op hits to text adventures – and have proven that his capers don't always need the backing of a well-known film to make them enjoyable. And let's not forget that without his original films and videogaming adventures we probably wouldn't have Rick Dangerous, Lara Croft or *Uncharted*'s Nathan Drake. So join us as we look back at the multitude of videogames starring everyone's favourite whip-wielding adventurer. Just don't call him Junior…



RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK 1982

ATARI 2600

Ignore the archaic visuals, as Howard Scott Warshaw's game is a surprisingly accomplished debut for the iconic archaeologist. Loosely based on the hit movie, *Raiders Of The Lost Ark* was the first ever licensed videogame and has the intrepid explorer seeking out the fabled Ark of the Covenant. The most interesting aspect of the game is that both joysticks are used by the player, one to move Jones and use an item and the other to select and drop items. It seems clunky today, and it is, but it was a great way of getting around the Atari 2600's limited single button joystick. A classic adventure that everyone should play.

INDIANA JONES IN THE LOST KINGDOM 1984

C64

Indy's second adventure is best forgotten. The bold explorer faces his biggest challenges yet – frustrating collision detection, woefully designed stages and clunky controls. Mindscape at least went for variety by having Jones navigate a series of different rooms, but the sloppy execution kills it stone dead. The rendition of the theme tune at the game's beginning is its high point and it never really recovers. We almost wish we received the same fate as the baddies at the end of *Raiders* so that our freshly melted eyeballs might never look upon it again.





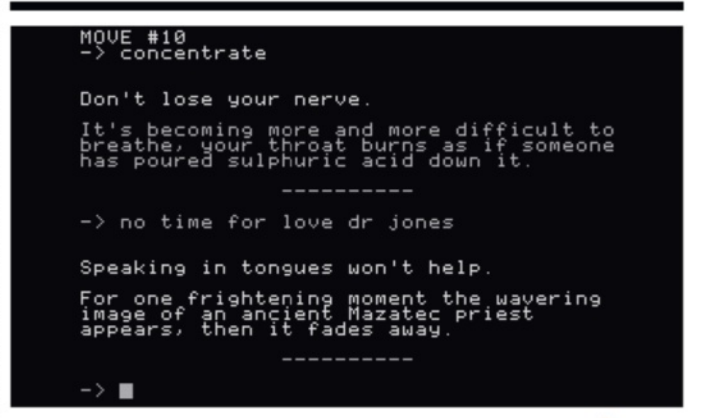


INDIANA JONES AND THE TEMPLE OF DOOM 1985

ARCADE

An enjoyable arcade romp that's split into several sections. The first sees you avoiding the Thuggee cult and snakes, while rescuing a number of children. You then take part in an exciting mine cart chase before facing off against a fireball-throwing Mola Ram and snatching back the fabled Sankara Stones. Well paced and with slick visuals and smart digitised speech, *Temple Of Doom* was a fantastic arcade game that received a bunch of decent home ports.

"WE ALMOST WISH WE RECEIVED THE SAME FATE AS THE BADDIES AT THE END OF RAIDERS SO THAT OUR FRESHLY MELTED EYEBALLS MIGHT NEVER LOOK UPON IT AGAIN"



INDIANA JONES IN REVENGE OF THE ANCIENTS 1987

APPLE II, MACINTOSH

Mindscape took another stab at the franchise and implanted Jones into a text adventure. The end results were pretty good, thanks to a decent parser, atmospheric locations and a solid storyline that saw Indy travelling to Mexico and recovering a powerful artefact from under the noses of pursuing Nazis. Just sitting on the cusp of proper graphic adventures, it proved to be a diverting timewaster and easily captured the character it was based upon, even if it didn't quite deliver the thrills and spills.



BEHIND THE SCENES

INTERVIEW: HAL BARWOOD

The director of Indiana Jones And The Fate Of Atlantis speaks



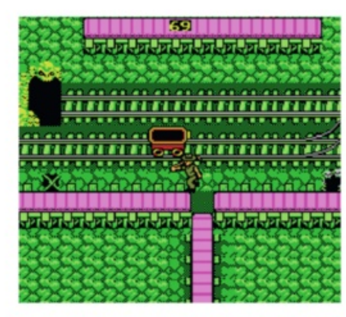
How did you become involved with *Indiana Jones And The Fate Of Atlantis*?
I'm an old friend of George Lucas. We went to film school together, and he knew of my interest in games way back in the early Eighties when LucasFilm Games was forming. He introduced me to Steve Arnold, who ran the Games Group for several years, and I started to hang around the company. I met David Fox, Ron Gilbert and Noah Falstein during that period. These guys worked hard as a triumvirate to produce the first LucasFilm licensed property ever, *Indiana Jones And The Last Crusade* – a wonderful game based on the last *Jones* movie, and a sizeable hit.

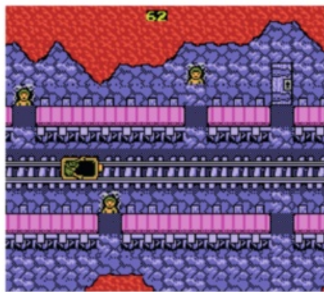
Why choose Atlantis?
Jones's adventures take place in an exaggerated version of the real world, with plenty of legitimate references to the treasures of antiquity. It's easy to run out of historical places and artefacts, but Atlantis is at least a 'real' myth – it all started with Plato, so its pedigree is perfect.

Why did you create the character of Sophia Hapgood?
We needed someone to unlock the story, and someone who could provide a key to its resolution. Kerner and his pals served the former purpose, and Sophia, with her physical and psychic bonds to the evil Nur-Ab-Sal, provided the latter. The truth is, they were all fun, but Sophia entertained me the most. Being at cross-purposes with Indy, with a guilty secret, with psychic powers, with a sharp tongue in her mouth; she energised the story.

How did you ensure continuity with the character?
There was a timeline bible meant for authors who wrote *Jones* comic books and novels, but that was of trivial importance. The main research was done sitting on a couch watching the movies unspool on videotape.

Why did you let Indy die?
It certainly went against the grain of the LucasArts house style, but felt right for Indy. In my mind, it's not a legitimate *Jones* yarn if he's not in mortal danger.





INDIANA JONES AND THE TEMPLE OF DOOM 1988

NES

Despite sharing similar gameplay this is sufficiently different to the arcade game to warrant its own mention. Indy must go around levels rescuing kids and avoiding enemies, but can pick up and use guns, keys, swords and map pieces (although switching between them is amazingly annoying). Later levels allow you to jump on mine carts and conveyer belts, but it's nowhere near as action-packed as the arcade original.

"WE'RE PARTICULARLY FOND OF THE FRANTIC RACE ACROSS THE CIRCUS TRAIN"



INDIANA JONES AND THE LAST CRUSADE: THE ACTION GAME 1989

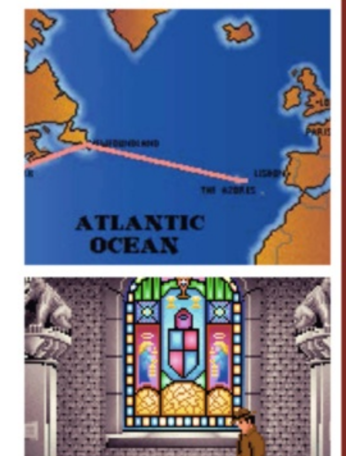
VARIOUS

This next offering is based on the third film and boasts great looking visuals and plenty of variety in its five levels (we're particularly fond of the frantic race across the circus train). It's hard though, so hard in fact that we'd bet Indy would rather pose in a picture with a giant anaconda than play the thing itself. Despite the high difficulty we often return to it. Maybe we're gluttons for punishment…

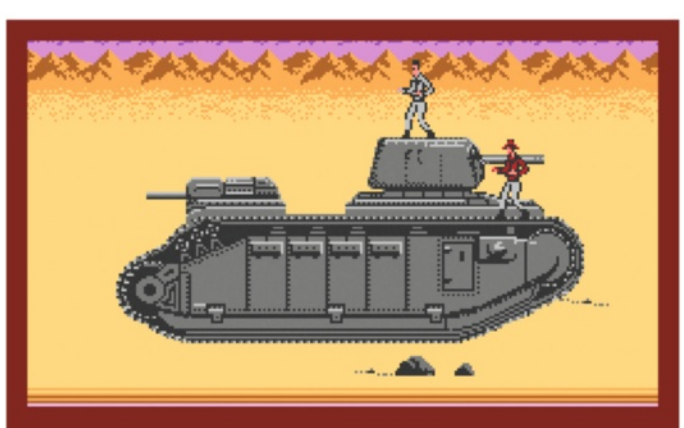
INDIANA JONES AND THE LAST CRUSADE: THE GRAPHIC ADVENTURE 1989

VARIOUS

This often overlooked adventure lacks the punch of the later *Fate Of Atlantis*, but is a nonetheless excellent outing for Henry Jones Jr. Created by the LucasFilm troika of David Fox, Noah Falstein and Ron Gilbert, it's a witty offering that utilises the SCUMM engine to annoyingly good effect and follows the film so well that you can use lines from it to solve some of its actual puzzles. The PC version is easily the best, but this isn't Indy's best point-and-click adventure…







INDIANA JONES AND THE LAST CRUSADE 1991

NES

This NES exclusive is an ambitious release featuring a number of different mini-games as Indy attempts to follow the film's plot. There are multiple choice options, overhead bike chases, side-on fighting sections, sliding puzzles, standard platforming and plenty more to keep Indy fans occupied. The visuals are a little flickery at times and the controls aren't the tightest, but there's an insane amount of entertainment packed into this release.

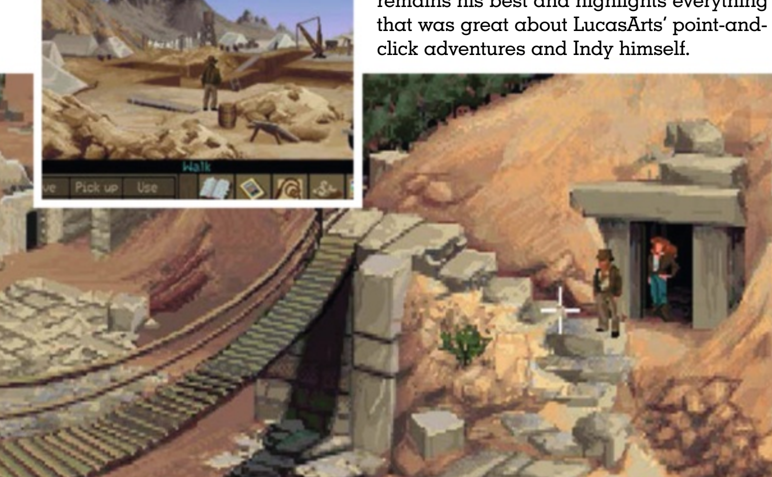
INDIANA JONES AND THE FATE OF ATLANTIS 1992

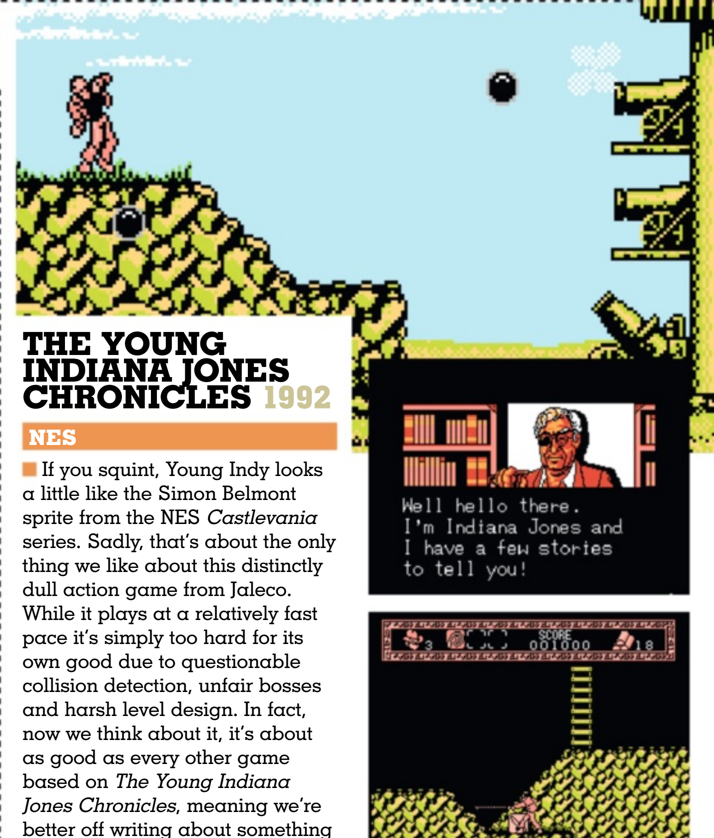
VARIOUS

Quite simply the greatest *Indiana Jones* adventure ever made. Created while LucasArts was at the height of its powers, it's an epic point-and-click adventure that had it all, including stunning visuals, a colourfully witty script, solid voice-acting (on the later CD-ROM versions) an entertaining storyline and plenty of brilliant puzzles. In fact, one of the greatest strengths of *Atlantis* was that it's effectively three games in one, with the player getting to choose from three distinct paths, each with their own puzzles, locations and cut-scenes. The Wits Path is heavily puzzle-based, The Fists Path sees Indy getting into plenty of scuffles, while The Team Path sees Indy teaming up with sidekick Sophia Hapgood.

Sophia turns out to be every bit as gutsy as *Raiders*' Marion Ravenwood, while the storyline throughout plays to the strengths of the franchise with a suitably majestic MacGuffin to uncover, plenty of Nazis to defeat and a globe-trotting adventure that cartwheels from a dig site in Iceland to the back alleys and market places of Algiers before finally ending in the fabled Atlantis.

Masterminded by Hal Barwood, the story for *Fate Of Atlantis* was superb, although it's worth noting that Barwood had already written a number of screenplays, including Steven Spielberg's *The Sugarland Express*, before tackling *Atlantis*. Barwood would work on three more *Indiana Jones* games, but his debut remains his best and highlights everything that was great about LucasArts' point-and-click adventures and Indy himself.





THE YOUNG INDIANA JONES CHRONICLES 1992

NES

If you squint, Young Indy looks a little like the Simon Belmont sprite from the NES *Castlevania* series. Sadly, that's about the only thing we like about this distinctly dull action game from Jaleco. While it plays at a relatively fast pace it's simply too hard for its own good due to questionable collision detection, unfair bosses and harsh level design. In fact, now we think about it, it's about as good as every other game based on *The Young Indiana Jones Chronicles*, meaning we're better off writing about something else entirely.

> "SOPHIA TURNS OUT TO BE EVERY BIT AS GUTSY AS RAIDERS' MARION, WHILE THE STORYLINE PLAYS TO THE STRENGTHS OF THE FRANCHISE"

INSTRUMENTS OF CHAOS STARRING YOUNG INDIANA JONES 1994

MEGA DRIVE

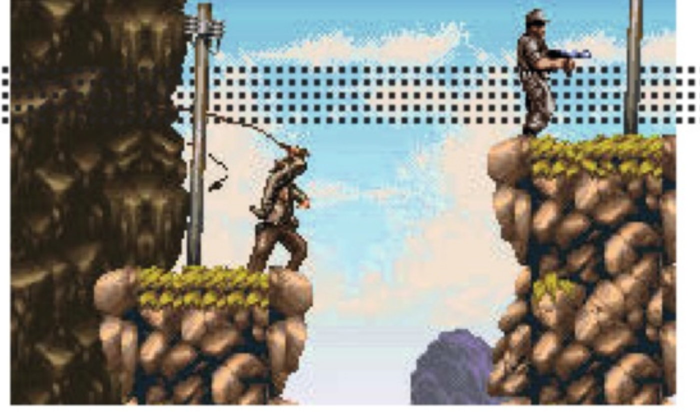
Poor old Mega Drive owners. SNES fans got the enjoyable *Indiana Jones' Greatest Adventures*, while they got stuck with one of the worst games in the franchise's history. Things start off promisingly enough with the ability to start off in one of five different locations that range from England to India and Tibet, but once you start playing things slide downhill like Indy in a giant inflatable raft.

Everything about *Instruments Of Chaos* ranges from average to awful. While the backgrounds are decent depictions of their locations, the animation of Indy and his enemies is laughable. The controls are terrible, with Indy bouncing off enemies, often at the cost of a life, while the soundtrack will soon drive you insane. We'd rather eat a bowl of chilled monkey brains than play this sorry mess of a game.









INDIANA JONES AND THE FATE OF ATLANTIS: THE ACTION GAME 1992

VARIOUS

Isometric adventures were all the rage back in the day, so it's no surprise to learn that Indy got in on the act as well. It follows the plot of the Dark Horse comics and is a fun romp with the novel touch of being able to switch between Indy and his sidekick Sophia Hapgood. It starts off slow with a trek around a casino, but things soon pick up and there's a fair amount of scrapping as you progress, ensuring this second *Atlantis* game certainly lives up to its promise of being an action game. It's worth noting though that the 8-bit conversions are pretty ropey in comparison.





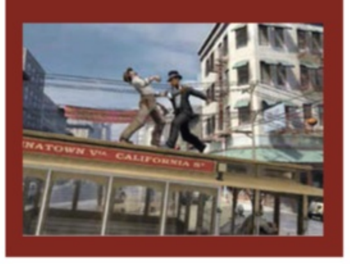
INDIANA JONES' GREATEST ADVENTURES 1994

SNES

While far from perfect due to a high difficulty level, this is easily the best 16-bit Indy action game. Powered by the *Super Star Wars* engine, it's an enjoyable romp through the first three films and filled with a number of excellent Mode 7 set pieces that range from a dash down a mountainside to being chased by the famous boulder from *Raiders*. As with the *Super Star Wars* games, the difficulty will be a little too high for some, but the inventive bosses (scrapping on a giant tank), excellent visuals and superb audio (that theme tune) will ensure that you keep plugging away at it.

INDIANA JONES AND THE CANCELLED GAMES

LucasArts is no stranger to cancelling games, so it should come as no surprise to learn that a number of unfinished *Indy* games exist. *Garden Of Life* was the Indy project Hal Barwood was hired to work on before it became *Fate Of Atlantis*. *Atlantis* had two sequels planned, *Indiana Jones And The Iron Phoenix* and *Indiana Jones And The Spear Of Destiny*. *Iron Phoenix* got 15 months into development when a nervous LucasFilm, concerned about how the game would fare in Germany due to its neo-Nazism, cancelled it. A Sega-CD version of *Fate Of Atlantis* was also cancelled. By far the most impressive *Indy* game is one known only as *Indy 2007*. It looked to be an epic adventure for Xbox 360 and PS3 utilising the Euphoria engine, but was quietly cancelled, with LucasArts concentrating on *Star Wars: The Force Unleashed*.







INDIANA JONES AND HIS DESKTOP ADVENTURES 1996

PC, MAC

The box art is a little misleading, as *Desktop Adventures* has nothing in common with *Indiana Jones And The Temple Of Doom*. It's a cute, if basic adventure game that has a deformed version of Indy exploring a randomly-generated game world set in Thirties America. Unlike every other game in the series, *Desktop Adventures* was designed to run windowed so that the player could perform additional tasks on their system. Like working perhaps? It's not an exceptionally deep game, but it's fun all the same.





INDIANA JONES AND THE INFERNAL MACHINE 1999

PC, N64

This was the first 3D Jones game, and he certainly had his work cut out. Lara Croft had already beaten him to the punch and was already on her fourth adventure before Jones caught up with her. Fortunately, he acquits himself well and, while it looks a little empty in places, it's a surprisingly good 3D debut that has some decent combat, plenty of clever puzzles and some rousing tunes. There's a great plot as well, most likely because Hal Barwood was once again on director duties, and only an occasionally wayward camera lets things down. The Game Boy Color version is essentially the same game in 2D with slightly more puzzles.





INDIANA JONES AND THE EMPEROR'S TOMB 2003

PC, PS2, XBOX

Emperor's Tomb is a solid, if rather derivative *Tomb Raider* clone. *Emperor's Tomb* is powered by the same engine that The Collective used for *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, meaning there's a fair amount of scrapping as Indy fights his way through all manner of exotic locations. While it scores for its authentic plot and interesting characters, it's let down by some tough puzzles and an infuriating camera. It's a solid enough adventure, but isn't as enjoyable as *Infernal Machine*.



LEGO INDIANA JONES: THE ORIGINAL ADVENTURES 2008

VARIOUS

This is quite simply the best *Indy* action game made so far. Yes it's aimed squarely at the younger end of the market, but there are more than enough gags – combined with genuinely solid gameplay – aimed at those that loved the original films to keep everyone happy. Just as Pixar is the master of keeping two distinctly different audiences entertained, so too is Traveller's Tales.

Yes there's a huge emphasis on collecting, but the traipsing around for studs, chests and other secrets is actually fun. The addition of phobias and riding vehicles adds neatly to the core gameplay first introduced in the *Star Wars* games, while Indy is able to use his whip to traverse the levels and battle with enemies. Spread across all three original films and featuring the franchise's usual drop-in, drop-out multiplayer mechanics, *Lego Indiana Jones: The Original Adventures* is an excellent game that does the man with the hat proud. Miss it at your peril.

"INDY IS ABLE TO USE HIS WHIP TO TRAVERSE THE MAPS AND BATTLE ENEMIES"

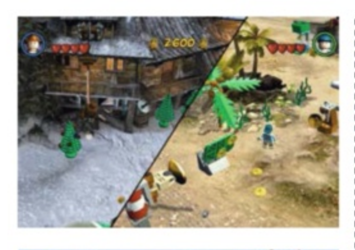


INDIANA JONES AND THE STAFF OF KINGS 2009

WII, PS2, PSP

Indiana Jones And The Staff Of Kings is nothing more than a bland, by-the-numbers action game. It has no redeeming features and makes little use of the Wii's unique controller, aside from some frustrating QTEs. The Wii version is the best out of the three due to featuring an inoffensive cooperative mode, and, best of all, the inclusion of *Indiana Jones And The Fate Of Atlantis*, which works surprisingly well with the Wii remote.







LEGO INDIANA JONES 2: THE ADVENTURE CONTINUES 2009

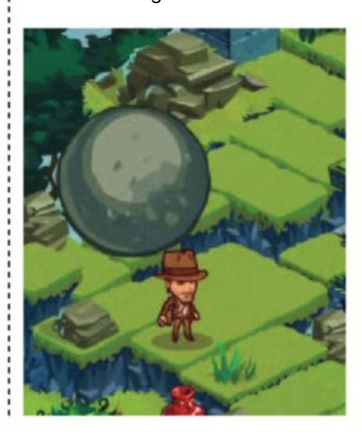
VARIOUS

It's unclear if we'll ever get another *Indiana Jones* game, so his last retail adventure ensures that Junior at least goes out with a bang. In addition to featuring a sprawling adventure based on *Kingdom Of The Crystal Skull*, Traveller's Tales also adds brand new levels based on the original three movies, improves the multiplayer with split-screen action and throws in a level editor for good measure. It's not a huge improvement gameplay-wise after the original game, but it still comes highly recommended.

INDIANA JONES ADVENTURE WORLD 2011

FACEBOOK

Sadly, the last *Indiana Jones* game to appear doesn't even exist anymore, as it was cancelled by developer Zynga in late 2012. It was originally planned as a standalone game, until Zynga entered a deal with LucasArts. The bright cartoony isometric setting was filled with all manner of quests to complete, but the gameplay was hampered by an annoying energy system that greatly diminished playing time, forcing you to hassle friends to join in so you could refill your meter. Interestingly, this was Hal Barwood's last involvement with the franchise, having handled its narrative design.



INDIANA JONES AND THE OBSCURE GAMES

Considering the popularity of Indiana Jones it should come as no surprise to learn that his adventures have cropped up in all sorts of places. When *The Adventures Of Young Indiana Jones* was released on DVD, the huge box set included three educational adventures. Using a basic point-and-click system and featuring a blonde cartoon version of Jones, the three games are all based on various *Young Indiana Jones* movies. *Revolution* loosely follows the plot of *Spring Break Adventure*, *Special Delivery* is based on the shenanigans found in *Oganga: Giver And Taker Of Life*, while *Hunting For Treasure* is based on *Treasure Of The Peacock's Eye*. All three games were released in 2007 and are surprisingly tough considering the audience they're aimed at.

Indy has also had a number of mobile adventures courtesy of developer Universomo. *Indiana Jones And The Kingdom Of The Crystal Skull* is a loose adaptation of the awful Shia LaBeouf-starring movie, while *Indiana Jones And The Lost Puzzles* is a tile-based puzzler that sees you avoiding snakes, boulders and other hazards.

We'd also like to take this opportunity to point out two *Indiana Jones* pinball tables, although you'll need deep pockets to procure them. *Indiana Jones: The Pinball Adventure* was released in 1993 by Williams and is a greatest hits of the three films, while Stern's 2008 *Indiana Jones* game updates the saga and includes references to *Crystal Skull*. There's even a selection of fruit machines available, proving LucasArts will stick their icon onto any format that would suit him.

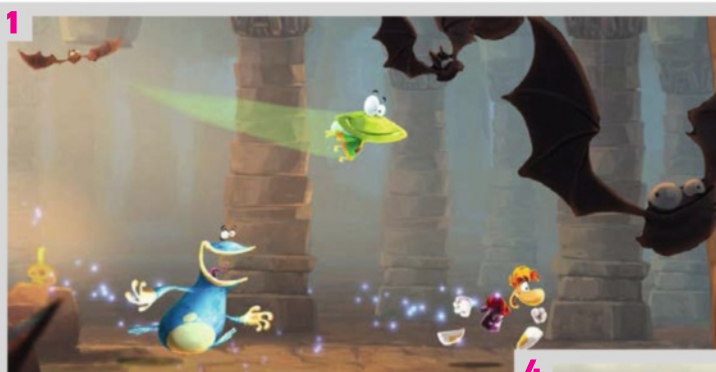


ESSENTIALS

10 OF THE MOST IRRITATING COMPANIONS

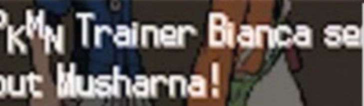
Intelligent, responsive, useful, charming – all of these are traits a good companion should have, especially if you're trekking through a world fraught with peril and monstrous enemies. Unfortunately, NPCs that decide to tag along with you in games tend to possess none of the above qualities. We've gathered the ten most irritating examples of AI incompetence for your amusement

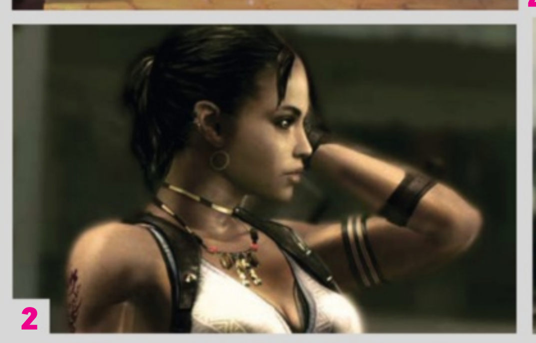
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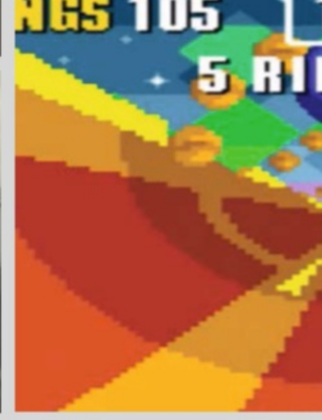


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5



Murfy
From: Rayman Legends

1 First introduced in *Rayman 2*, Murfy is some weird mix of fairy, frog and fly whose sole purpose in life seems to be aiding Rayman in his travels through the land. Originally, Murfy bestowed useful information to Rayman, telling him where to go and how to dispatch certain enemies while being an all-round nice guy. Cut forward to *Rayman Legends*, and Murfy has undergone some horrific transformation – he's lost the power of speech and just makes noises at you, flitting around the screen and getting in your way as you try to free-run your way past falling obstacles. We appreciate he's only trying to help, we just wish he'd shut up as he's doing it.

Sheva Alomar
From: Resident Evil 5

2 If you were caught in the middle of a zombie infestation and found yourself with limited ammunition, limited medical supplies with which to heal yourself and one surviving human partner, you definitely would not do any of the following: use all of your rounds of ammunition up on one approaching zombie's leg, chow down on all your medicinal herbs the second you take a hit, or decide that your human partner needs a few rifle rounds in his head just as things are getting sticky. Sheva actively made *Resident Evil 5* a much harder game to play and, for us, she became no more than a packhorse who we let use a pistol, if she was behaving herself at that particular moment.

Bianca
From: Pokémon Black 2/White 2

3 Bianca is one of those *Pokémon* characters that is just about bearable for the most part – whilst overly verbal, she is generally quite useful – and in *Black 2/ White 2* she even gives you your first Pokémon. However, later on in the game she insists you team up with her to work through Reversal Mountain. This shouldn't be a problem, but Bianca's indiscriminate attack patterns once cost us a shiny Camerupt – we defeated the wild Pokémon's partner and were readying our Ultra Ball to catch the incredibly rare find when Bianca decided to kill it. That was the only shiny we found in 100 hours of playing, and we'll never forgive Bianca for ruining it for us.

Fawkes
From: Fallout 3

4 The over-powered and intellectual Fawkes was the best companion you could have on paper – he spent years cooped up in a cell with nothing to do but read, he had a gatling laser with seemingly unlimited ammo strapped to his back and his very presence was terrifying. Yet somehow – maybe it was the radiation that fried his brain – he managed to be the single most stupid companion we met in the Capital Wasteland; attacking non-threatening NPCs for no justifiable reason, managing to kill himself as we fast-travelled elsewhere and apparently not knowing the meaning of the word 'stealth'. It's a shame, too; Fawkes had so much potential.

Miles 'Tails' Prower
From: Sonic The Hedgehog 2

5 The second *Sonic The Hedgehog* game introduced lupine lackey Tails, who you could choose to play as alone or have accompany Sonic on his adventures over the Emerald Isle. Occasionally helpful, Tails would hover over Sonic and pick him up – particularly useful during Dr Robotnik encounters when you were about to fall to your death. Otherwise, though, Tails was a liability. Losing you rings in bonus levels, jumping into pits in suicidal bids to get attention and flying into the screen at the *worst* moments to distract you from completing a well-timed jump, Tails always had the best of intentions but just couldn't keep up with Sonic's blistering speed.



The Survivors
From: Dead Rising

6 As a team, we like to think we're fairly altruistic here at **games™** – if there's a life we're capable of saving, we'll do whatever we can to save it. All we expect in return is a little bit of thanks and maybe something in the way of a modest monetary reward (if you could spare it, that is). What we don't expect, after fighting our way through a shopping complex full of the marauding, brain-eating undead, is for a person to start attacking *us* with a weapon *we gave them*. Even if a survivor didn't attack us, we'd expect them to be able to defend themselves at least a little bit. But they can't. Perhaps that's why they got trapped there in the first place.

Catherine-B320
From: Halo: Reach

7 Otherwise known as Kat, or Noble Two, the ballsy Lieutenant Commander had been trained since early childhood to be a Spartan – a killing machine educated specifically in battlefield stratagem and combat. Strange then, that a woman whose entire life has been lived on the battlefield has incredibly little awareness of enemy tactics, driving you directly into the middle of an enemy formation packed-out with anti-vehicular weapons and then attempting complex three-point turns to escape. It's no wonder Noble Team met their end on Reach with her opting to drive all the time. She did have a robot arm, though, so maybe that impacted her driving.

Dominic Santiago
From: Gears Of War

8 A veteran of hundreds of skirmishes with the subterranean Locust, you'd have thought Dom would be a tactical genius – clued up on the guerrilla-style tactics necessary when taking out grubs, drones, tickers or whatever other nasties the Locust hoard would throw at you. But apparently not. In the first *Gears of War*, Dom seems to suffer from suicidal overconfidence – throwing himself gung-ho into swarms of enemies and being taken out almost instantly. If you didn't break cover and haul your childhood friend back to safety before he got curb-stomped, it was game over. Unfortunately, that usually meant dying in the process. Lose-lose.

Eileen Galvin
From: Silent Hill 4: The Room

9 Scared out of her mind after and trapped in a hellish world that she doesn't understand, Eileen has every right to behave a little strangely. But in a situation that is literally life or death, you'd assume some kind of fight-or-flight instinct would kick in, pushing you to survive for as long as you can, tapping into every resource you have inside you, as a human. But no, not for Eileen. Instead she hangs around in front of doors, blocking your escape from nightmarish creatures, walking back to seemingly examine the very things that are trying to kill her, all while moving at what can only be described as a glacial pace. The sort of survival horror we don't condone.

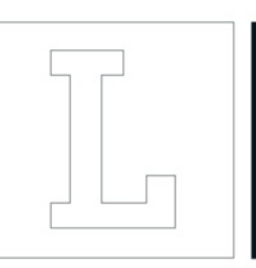
Natalya
From: GoldenEye 007

10 For a man that attracts some of the most sassy, intelligent women in the espionage profession, James Bond really didn't fare too well by winning the attention of computer programmer Natalya. Broadly considered the most annoying thing about *GoldenEye 007*, Natalya would constantly get in the way of Bond's well-placed shots, walk *so slowly* when trying to go anywhere and generally just screw up missions for the ever-patient 007. Natalya was so incessantly infuriating that it lead us here at **games™** to create a meta-game within *GoldenEye 007* – playing pass the controller to see how many times we could shoot Natalya before she died. We're not even sorry.















iPHONE 5S/5C

MANUFACTURER: **Apple** PRICE: **£549-£709/£469-£549**

APPLE HAS PLAYED no small part in the most important gaming revolution of the past decade, helping to cement smartphones and tablets as one of the medium's leading platforms. As such, we turn our attention to the company's latest iPhone iteration, the 5s – and its budget alternative, the 5c – with an eye on how they'll evolve the handheld gaming market.

Starting with the 5s, the most attention-grabbing feature of the new device is its fingerprint scanner (which replaces the PIN lock system); however, a far more interesting aspect of the new phone is the 64-bit processor comparative to that of a desktop computer. Not only will this see much improvement on the current battery life while playing processor-intensive games, but it'll also enable developers to create more complex experiences for mobile, while polishing it with a higher graphical fidelity. It has the potential to not only radically raise the quality, substance and scope of software that appears on the App Store, but also create an opportunity for an influx of publisher back catalogue releases to be accessible at any time, anywhere.

Of course, functionality is still an obstacle for developers trying to translate traditionally styled titles onto the touchscreen interface, but the past year has seen *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* and *Knights Of The Old Republic* appear on mobile devices undiluted. We could see a much greater parity between the types of downloadable titles appearing across consoles and mobile platforms.

That being said, the iPhone 5c model doesn't share the same advanced architecture as its bigger brother. Under the new polycarbonate exterior, this budget device (that still commands an eye-watering price tag) more closely resembles the iPhone 5, sharing the same processor. Nevertheless, it's still a powerful piece of kit and one that, arguably, developers have yet to fully explore the potential of.

And that's the bottom line when it comes to Apple's new iPhones. There's little question that the superior 5s is a progressive device, capable of supporting higher-quality gaming experiences than any of its predecessors. However, given the limited user base and the increasing popularity of Android alternatives, it's hard to foresee developers truly exploiting the technology to its full potential.

As a stepping stone, it's a promising sign of things to come.



GAMING CLOTHING



JOEL

Inspired by Joel's blood-drenched garb sported in *The Last Of Us*, Naughty Dog really brought flannel back in a big, big way.
http://tinyurl.com/nwycr6j



VAULT BOY MODIFY WATCH

Limited to just 500 made, this *Fallout* watch is just the kitsch your wrist demands to help count down to the apocalypse.
http://tinyurl.com/qdegj3t



ASSASSIN'S CREED BLACK FLAG - HIDDEN BLADE LONG SLEEVE

Ubisoft has released this T-shirt (hoodie?) that handily outlines where to strap extremely dangerous and impractical weaponry.
http://tinyurl.com/outrmlv

POKÉMON TRANSFORMING PLUSH

RETAILER: **AMAZON** PRICE: **£19.99**

POKÉMON X* AND *Y are upon us, but before you remove yourself from reality to start filling your Pokédex, why not start filling up your living space with useless merchandise? This officially licenced plush unfolds from a Poké Ball into one of three creatures from Nintendo's franchise, each to be admired, displayed ironically or given to a small child like the one pictured feigning enthusiasm. With Snivy, Oshawott and Tepig to choose from, you could collect all three and play a game of 'Guess the Pokémon'! Or, y'know, do something more constructive with your time.





RAZER BLADE

MANUFACTURER: **RAZER** PRICE: **$1999.99**

THE LATEST IN Razer's line of Blade gaming laptops is a slight departure from previous iterations. It's not just a slimmer, sleeker model (a thin-cut 14-inch machine) but disposes of the previous model's bespoke Switchblade interface. Alongside the obvious space this saves, it also makes it a much more accessible machine than its predecessors, falling in line with more traditional laptop computers. Audio output has noticeably improved over the previous generations and the display offers a clear picture, if slightly lacking in visual punch. Most importantly though, it can handle the graphical heft of anything you can throw at it, making it at the very top-end of gaming laptops currently on the market. In fact, given its price, stylish design and versatility compared to a MacBook Pro, it's not just a great machine for enthusiasts, but an exceptional laptop overall.



STEELSERIES FROST BLUE BUNDLE

MANUFACTURER: **STEELSERIES** PRICE: **£124.99**

PACKING IN THE Siberia v2 Frost Blue Headset, the similarly hued Sensei mouse and QcK mousepad, this bundle boasts some of SteelSeries' most elite performance-driven accessories at a reduced retail price. Both the mouse and the headset have been lauded for their tournament-grade components and performance, and the whole set has been dusted with a frosty finish.




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18
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MMO
WORLDS
The essential guide to the online gaming universe
LSPD
158 A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO...
THE LORD OF THE RINGS ONLINE
The land of Hobbits, Dwarves and Elves, games™ acts as your guide to Middle-earth
160 GUILD CHAT
DUST 514
CCP Games' creative director discusses Dust 514's newbie-aimed update 1.5
154 FEATURE
GTA ONLINE
games™ heads back to the sordid streets of Los Santos to see whether Rockstar's ambitious attempt to take GTA online pays off

GTA ONLINE: ROCKSTAR'S FIRST MMO

Though the launch was troubled, Grand Theft Auto V's online component is one of the most generous and fascinating MMOs we've recently played, though the fundamentals may need some work...

As a kind of dark-hearted yang to *GTA V*'s all-conquering yin, *GTA Online* has had a truly dreadful introduction into the fiercely-competitive connected gaming world. Despite Rockstar's fair warning that things might not go as smoothly as they should come launch day, it didn't start too well.

The first few days were almost impossible to get into – hours wasted standing in car parks or stuck watching loading screens. And since then, during the following days, you couldn't go five minutes without someone complaining that they'd lost all their progress and money, and their character has simply vanished into thin air like a witness in a mob trial. By the time you're reading this, everything should have settled down, and the bad-behaviour simulator should be behaving itself once and for all. A good job too if so, as *GTA Online* is a reckless triumph when it does work; a kind of ingenious patchwork of emergent brilliance, measured structure and a handful of half-baked ideas that threaten, but rarely manage, to pull the whole thing apart. It begins, of course, with you.

Unlike most character creators, though, *GTA Online* asks you not to adjust eyebrow angles and

There isn't nearly as much traffic with many players on the map, but you can forgive that.

nostril width, but to pick the faces of your lineage. Once grandparents and parents are sorted, the game will assign you a face. It's a strange system, but one that's actually managed to build a more realistic version of this writer than most slider-happy character builders. Once constructed, your new low life thug is transported to LS on a jetplane, where he meets single-player stalwart Lamar Davis, and is introduced to the game's various systems.

What follows is a rather odd tutorial – a multi-part how-to for *GTA* in general rather than the specifics of its online world – but it does introduce you to the concept of car ownership and lets you try out a race and a deathmatch. After that, you're dumped into a version of LS with 15 other human players, and you're free to do what you please.

The first thing you'll likely notice is how empty the place is. Traffic and pedestrian density is considerably lower than the single player city, but it's an understandable sacrifice to make when 16 players are wreaking havoc simultaneously. The next thing you'll notice is how unspeakably poor you are. Money drives everything in this world, and without it you might as well just walk around waiting to be killed. The mini-map shows 15 white blips, each of which is a potential aggressor, team-mate or victim. Other players will more often-than-not attempt to kill you, simply for the fun

"You're dumped into a version of Los Santos with 15 players, free to do as you please"

of it (you can lose your unbanked cash, but they cannot directly steal the same amount), but occasionally you can form a tense and fragile alliance with a stranger. Some of our best times have come from teaming up with these strange criminals for a spree of terror and ill gains. Should you choose to team up with another player, you'll have to decide whether or not to split the profits of your criminal lifestyle with them. Whoever gets the haul from a hold-up, for example, has the option to dish out funds to everyone on team, or just keep it for him or herself. Suffice to say, those choosing the latter option better have a fool-proof escape plan.

Early hours in Los Santos will likely be spent knocking off liquor stores and escaping the attentions of the police, pulling together enough cash to grab a better gun and bit more ammo. You can also sell cars to Los Santos customs for a bit more (look out for SUVs, they always turn over around $9000). There are blips on the map that let you jump into deathmatches and races, too, but the action really heats up at level 5. Everything you accomplish in-game awards you RP, or Reputation Points, which



Naturally we weren't going to take our own screenshots without showing off.



The interface of arranging multiplayer is a lot better than it was in *GTA IV*.

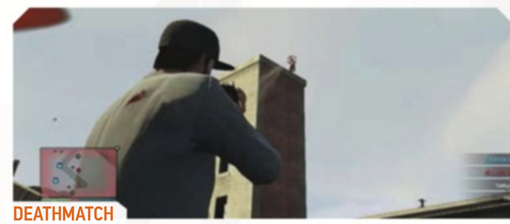
MODES

HOW TO WASTE YOUR TIME IN LOS SANTOS OUTSIDE OF THE FREE ROAMING



RACE

EXACTLY WHAT you'd expect. All manner of options are available, from point-to-point pushbike rides to off-road derbies featuring motorbikes and cars. If you're good, you can win a lot of money coming in first place in a full lobby.



DEATHMATCH

THE PREVALENCE of Auto-aim means *GTA Online*'s deathmatches place more emphasis on awareness and cover than your typical shooter. There are team variants, of course, as well as Free For All, and while it's hardly *Gears*, it's still surprisingly tense.



MISSION

THE REAL meat of *GTA Online*'s gameplay. Some of these occur in the voting system, but most come from contacts in freeroam. Expect to play a lot of co-op theft missions and multi-team objective games. If you want the real *GTA Online* experience, stick with missions.



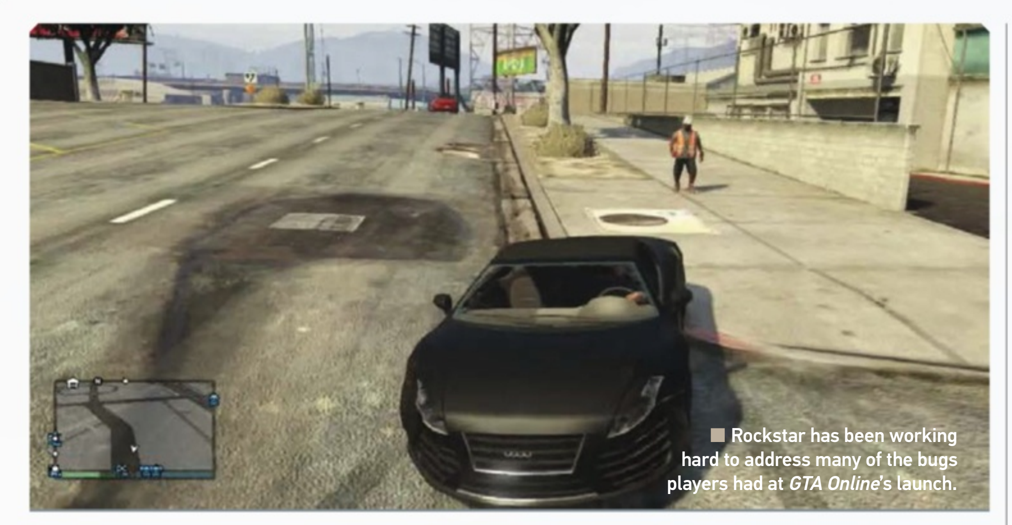
SURVIVAL

HORDE, ESSENTIALLY. You and your team will hold out a specific location while waves of bad guys come along to try and shoot you. It's not a particularly sophisticated version of this now-classic gametype, but it's enjoyable nonetheless.



PARACHUTE

PILOTWINGS WITH wonderful graphics. Steer your parachuting character through the rings and make sure you land on the target. You can spice up the action by letting players shoot one another on the way down, but this is a mode better enjoyed by pacifists.


Rockstar has been working hard to address many of the bugs players had at *GTA Online*'s launch.

contribute towards your overall rank. As you rank up, different contacts will phone and text you, offering a pretty good range of missions and opportunities. Most of these are excellent cooperative affairs, and really come to life when you have people you know in the game with you. Even something as simple as a cross-country drive followed

"Get a few missions under your belt, and you will have enough cash to buy a garage… that's when GTA Online really starts to gets its hooks into you"



by a shootout in the desert can turn into something memorable, as physics, systems and design collide in typically hilarious fashion. You might love your friends, but there's something undeniably funny about watching an NPC car fly into their prone body at 100mph.

Get a few missions under your belt, then, and you'll have enough cash to buy a garage. It's a pretty modest thing to buy, but only when you do sign on the digital dotted line does *GTA Online* really start to get its hooks in. *GTA IV* let you and friends run riot in its open world, but nothing ever really felt permanent – it was transient fun, of the moment, but never leaving an impression.

The world of Los Santos takes on a different feeling when you're online.

Being in a car with another player is actually just fun in and of itself, as long as that player knows how to drive.

In *GTA Online*, your actions have consequences. Less so the crimes – although shop owners will recognise you if you don't wear a mask during a hold-up – but your imprint on Los Santos has a permanence. Your work now feels like it is actually working towards something – to buy the new car, the new apartment. Your accumulating RP opens up more and more fun – new vehicle types, new missions, new contacts. It's clear Rockstar has built *GTA Online* as a world to inhabit for years, not just a few passing hours.

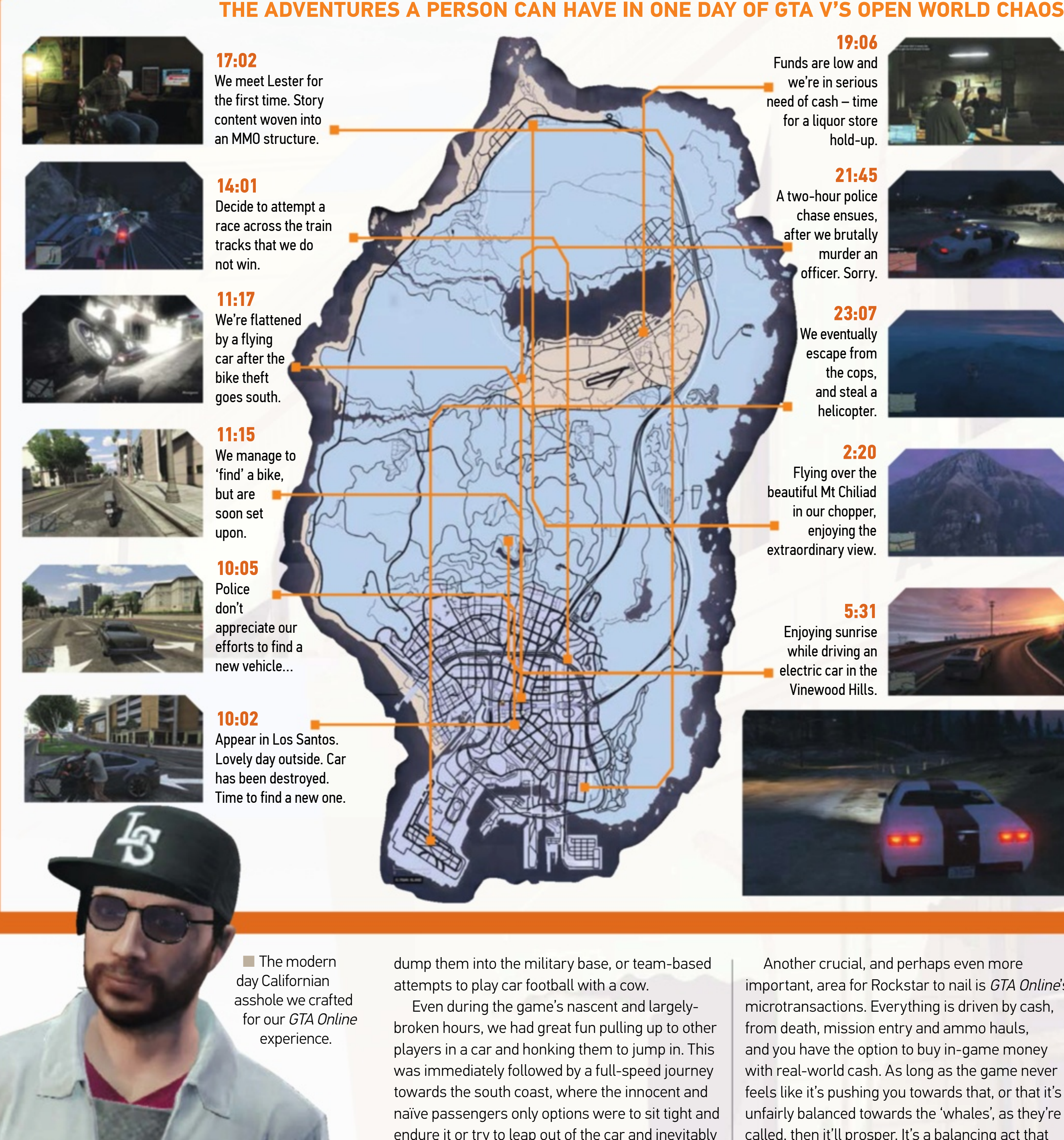
Whether or not it can truly compete with the big boys in both the console online world and the MMO space it seems to be trying to lean towards, is still a genuine mystery. So many elements don't top what's already out there. Its deathmatches aren't as good as *Call Of Duty*, its races not as sharp as *Need For Speed* or *Forza Horizon*. Yet put it all together and *GTA Online* offers so much more than any other game in this world – it offers endless possibility.

The amount of fun you can have in *GTA Online* depends on your own creativity. Just as *GTA III* truly came to life when players started to test its limits, so too *GTA Online* rewards teams who seek out new ways to play. Some are obvious – dirt-bike rides down Mount Chiliad, *Bonnie And Clyde*-style robbery chains – but we've already heard stories about players using the Cargobob chopper to hook up other people's cars and



24 HOURS IN LOS SANTOS

THE ADVENTURES A PERSON CAN HAVE IN ONE DAY OF GTA V'S OPEN WORLD CHAOS



The modern day Californian asshole we crafted for our *GTA Online* experience.

dump them into the military base, or team-based attempts to play car football with a cow.

Even during the game's nascent and largely-broken hours, we had great fun pulling up to other players in a car and honking them to jump in. This was immediately followed by a full-speed journey towards the south coast, where the innocent and naïve passengers only options were to sit tight and endure it or try to leap out of the car and inevitably die. Watching them hurtle into the sea as you drive off the pier never got old, funnily enough.

The key to *GTA Online*'s continued success, then, is in how Rockstar manages this terrifying potential. It has already promised to support the game with regular (and free) content – a mission editor and cooperative heists are both due in the near future. Creating structured content that allows for the kind of madness possible in free-roam mode is surely the secret – missions like Top Fun, which pits fighter jets against dirtbikes, is the high bar so far.

Another crucial, and perhaps even more important, area for Rockstar to nail is *GTA Online*'s microtransactions. Everything is driven by cash, from death, mission entry and ammo hauls, and you have the option to buy in-game money with real-world cash. As long as the game never feels like it's pushing you towards that, or that it's unfairly balanced towards the 'whales', as they're called, then it'll prosper. It's a balancing act that Rockstar hasn't had to attempt before, but the goodwill surrounding this magnificent project should let it suffer a few slip-ups along the way, should they arise.

The shakiest of starts, then, but what potential. *GTA Online* feels like Rockstar truly approaching the connected space like it does with its single-player epics. There's vast scope for almost anything you can think of, and with community-created content joining Rockstar's own brand of activities, it's not unfeasible to think *GTA Online* could last for years.



VITAL STATS

YEARS ACTIVE: 6
YEARS FREE TO PLAY: 3
EXPANSIONS: 5
MONTHLY COST: Nothing
PLAYABLE CLASSES: 9
PLAYABLE RACES: 4
PLAYABLE MONSTER RACES (PVP ONLY): 4
PLAYABLE MONSTER CLASSES (PVP ONLY): 6
MAX LEVEL: 85
SERVER TYPES: PVP, PVMP, RP
CHARATERS PER ACCOUNT: 2 (for free players)
NEXT EXPANSION: 18 November 2013

Beginner's Guide

THE LORD OF THE RINGS ONLINE

PUT YOUR FEET UP AND RELAX WITH TURBINE'S CHARMINGLY LAIDBACK MMO

Released in 2007, *Lord Of The Rings Online* was part of the big early 21st Century MMO boom, when it seemed like every major franchise could make money just by building an online world. What set it apart was how it focused on the relaxing nature of Tolkien's fantasy world as much as the conflict between good and evil. *Lord Of The Rings Online* gained a reputation for being a game that was more about stealing pies, furnishing houses and playing the lute than vanquishing Sauron. It's charming.

LOTRO was also notable for being one of the first major Western MMOs to move to the free-to-play model. The game went free three years ago, with Turbine claiming the switch tripled its revenue overnight. The free-to-play market has become much more crowded since then, but *LOTRO* keeps going, even as its peers close their doors. Perhaps it is that unusually relaxed atmosphere that keeps people coming back. There are hundreds of fantasy MMOs about fighting orcs, but only *LOTRO* offers us the chance to simply live in The Shire, admire the rural landscape and smoke a little pipeweed before second supper.

Which guide would you like to see tackled next?
Let us know on Twitter or Facebook

Frodos and Frodon'ts

GETTING STARTED WITH THE LORD OF THE RINGS ONLINE

FAMILIAR FACES

1 EACH RACE HAS a short sequence of intro missions that mostly consists of standing around while major *Lord Of The Rings* characters save the day. Elves hang around with Elrond, while men and hobbits get to chat with Strider. Those who've just seen *The Hobbit* will want to check out the dwarf intro, where you can watch Gandalf literally invite everyone but you to join in on Thorin's expedition to the Lonely Mountain, then save you from a cave troll.





BARD'S TALE

2 ONE OF *LOTRO*'S most unusual feature is the music system. Bard NPCs can sell you instruments and teach you how to use them. You can freestyle by typing /music and hammering different keys, or write a specific song in the form of an ABC file and then play it back by typing "/play Filename". Players have already converted tons of songs to the format, so you can probably find some of your favourites with a quick rummage through Google.

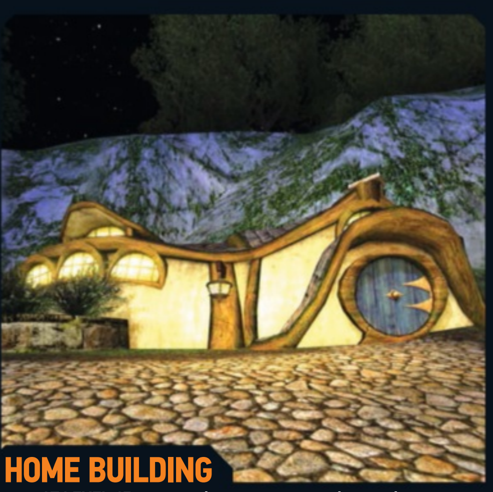
TOWN LIFE

3 AFTER THE BASIC tutorial quest you'll get let loose in your first town. Hobbits start in The Shire, which was one of the game's first areas and still among the best. There's a distinct lack of epic world-shattering events, just grumpy hobbits bickering over stolen pies. It's a wonderfully relaxed and sedate place that really sets *LOTRO* apart from other MMOs. Be sure to do the quests where you play as a chicken, they're great!



MONSTER HUNTER

4 MONSTER PLAY IS *LOTRO*'s take on PVP. Once you get a regular character up to level 10 you can elect to create a monster character. Free players only have access to the Orc Reaver, but you can spend money to unlock Wargs, Uruk-hai and spiders. Monsters hang out in a PVP area called the Ettenmoors, where they face off against level 80 regular characters in an endless war for control of the area.



HOME BUILDING

5 AT LEVEL 15 you get the option to purchase a house in any of the four starting areas. It doesn't have to be the one you start in, so dwarves and elves can move to The Shire if they want. Buying a simple house costs around one gold, but there's a catch – you need to pay 50 silver a week upkeep or your house will be locked shut. Yes, you have a mortgage in an MMO now.



GUILD CHAT

The most pertinent questions facing MMO developers today



Atli Már Sveinsson

Creative director, CCP Games

Dust 514

Following its launch earlier in the year, Dust 514 has been steadily growing its user base, while CCP Games has been addressing its teething problems. **games™** spoke to creative director Atli Már Sveinsson about how the MMO will evolve with update 1.5

You've said that the motivation for update 1.5 was to improve chances of new players making it past day one of playing *Dust 514*. How have you achieved that?
The number one complaint from new users has been on accessibility of systems such as the skill system and dropsuit and vehicle customisation. The New Player Experience (NPE) takes important steps in making these systems more understandable.

Corporate bureaucracy is the heart of *EVE*, what's the significance of including Corporation Taxes in *Dust*?
Highly organised player organisations, especially the ones that are participating in planetary conquest, need good tools in order to manage the number of members they have. Corporation taxes are a way to fund the organisation in a centralised manner without having to go through the hassle of individual donations. Introduction of corporation roles and management tools for those also help in delegating responsibilities. Many of these corporations have member count in the hundreds and distributed across all time zones. We must also remember that corporations in *Dust* are shared in *EVE*, where there are already many sophisticated tools available for directors. We feel it is important to gradually give *Dust* players more access to these functions.

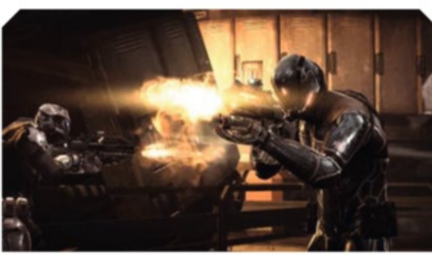
Has there been any feedback that has surprised you with *EVE* and *Dust 514* players?
The *EVE* community has been very supportive of the *Dust* guys. We´ve seen far more collaboration and information sharing than we expected, which is very encouraging. The features that link the games today are relatively lightweight, something that we will address in coming months. As those more advanced features come online, with more resources shared between the two games, we expect collaboration between the two player bases to increase.

This was your first foray into the FPS genre, and while you faced some issues at launch, *Dust 514* is fairly stable now. What lessons have you learnt?
For more than a decade we were a single-game company. Launching *Dust* has been a huge learning experience for us, which prepares us for future products such as *Valkyrie* and *World Of Darkness*.

Do you worry that you're spreading yourselves, and the *EVE* franchise, too far as you continue with updates for *Dust 514* and prepare to roll out *EVE: Valkyrie*?
I am not worried about that. We´ve adapted our whole organisation around these new products.

How do you think PS4's launch will impact on *Dust 514*'s plans for the future?
We are laser-focused on providing the best experience possible on the PS3. There are 80 million PS3s around, and while the new console is a fantastic piece of hardware, it will take time for its install base to support F2P games such as *Dust 514*.

> "Launching Dust has definitely been a huge learning experience for us"



Update 1.5 introduces the New Player Experience that offers a more straightforward introduction of *Dust 514* complex systems.



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